Hindu Gods And Goddesses

Swami Nirmalananda

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The World-Teacher Acharya Swamy Pranavanandaji Maharaj
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BLESSINGS

Nearly a thousand years of foreign domination has begun to clearly tell upon the Hindu nation. Its unlucky signs are visible in religion, culture, society ; in the collective and in the individual. Acharya Swami Pranabananda, founder of Bharat Sevashram Sangha had made a miraculous appearance with his spiritual powers, in order to stem this tide and rebuild religion and society. He is the saviour of the Hindus. His tremendous divine force has blown away the sediment of mire that has accumulated through thousands of years. Once more, today, everywhere life and vitality begin to throb back.

The Sanatan Dharma (traditional religion) of the Hindus has been in many ways affected. A meaningless cycle of rituals and worship had turned into a mere meaningless, habit. The spiritual fire of the Acharya burnt down these thoughtless repetitions. The life-force of the Hindu religion has once more begun to vibrate and flow.

The Acharya's endeavour was to once more knit together the Hindus and make them powerful ; make them alert about self-protection and of propagation. The book "Hindu Gods And Goddesses", has been compiled keeping in view these ideals of Swami Pranabananda. It will be no exaggeration to say that the Hindu is totally ignorant about the philosophy and principles underlying the images he worships. Consequently his festivals have degenerated into routine carnivals of merry-making.

This book, as a blessing of the Acharya and founder of the Sangha, is aimed at reawakening the memories of the Hindu masses and inspiring them to a conscious and lively observance of religion.

Swami Vedananda
Co-President
Bharat Sevasram Sangha

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

"Hindu Gods And Goddesses" has been published. Many questions arise regarding the divinities. This book is a humble attempt to answer these queries. The reader will judge how far I have been successful. But truly, the writer has no claim to it. The founder of Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Srimat Swami Pranabanandaji Maharaj, whose spiritual power and yoga perceived consciousness in the form of the gods and goddesses, has been my inspiration and guide. The truth of oneness that he realised through his pure life, has been my pole-star. He is my Guru. This is the foundation of this work. The word (mantra) is true ; worship is true ; God is true ; Guru is true and Liberation is Truth. To revive Hinduism, he has re-told these five ancient truths. He wanted to purge the mechanical, ignorant incompleteness, and the dull, dark forces that had. To do so, by his own hands, he had established many centres of Bharat Sevashram Sangha ; set up hundreds of Hindu Milan Mandirs where worship of Kali, Durga, Shiva, Krishna, Saraswati, Sitala and others were introduced. To him goes the credit of pointing out the utility of these in the life of the individual and that of the society. In the present age we do not know if any other great soul has succeeded in accomplishing such a vast experiment.

Why did he himself encourage, inspire and ask his disciples to take the lead in explaining the philosophy and in starting the worship of gods and goddesses ? This was because he was aware of the great influence these divinities had in the hearts of Hindus. He knew that by excluding them a renaissance of Hindu culture would not be possible. Thus he pioneered a national resurgence based on spiritualism. In "Thirteen festivals in twleve months" this has been laid out in detail. I have resolved to hold up this book "Hindu Gods And Goddesses" in front of the Hindu masses who have become forgetful of their glorious traditions as a blessing from Sri Sri Acharya.

In Bharata, the country of spiritualism, even today many gods and goddesses are worshipped. But in most of the cases it is either a mechanical ritual or a blind dogma. How many are

there who understand the underlying philosophies or even care to do so ? Then again, who is there to explain ? From both the sides there is a lack of effort ; a vacuum. It is urgent to put an end to this situation.

In the following book, the first part is devoted to the general principles lying behind the concept of divine images. In the second part, the sequence and rules are discussed. In both the parts the many facets of the One Brahman, His formlessness and His forms, the secret of the evolving form of the divinities, their consciousness, the general principles about the animals who carry the gods, the non-communal outlook of worship, spiritual greatness, the relevance of worship to the collective and to the individual and how the seeker can achieve his ultimate realisation through such worship, are discussed. This background is essential to get the total picture. Twenty one deities are included in the chapters. (Later two more chapters have been added). Twelve are gods and nine are goddesses. Their salutations, imagery and hymns are enunciated. Their significance during the Vedic and pre-historical periods are detailed ; sometimes the tantric explanations are also included. Their form, complexion, weapons, adornments are described as far as possible. Lastly, the animals who carry them are discussed. After describing the zoological particulars (shape and nature) of animals and birds, the connections between the creatures and the divinities are sought. This is the central flow of thought in this volume. The writer wishes from the very bottom of his heart, that the Hindus become aware of the images they worship ; that the Hindus resolve to worship them with dedication and purity based on this knowledge, and in this way move towards a higher spiritual plane, that will enhance perseverance, moral character, knowledge, industry and awaken a love for The Motherland. This will make ideal citizens. If this book fulfills even an iota of such hopes the writer will feel his toils to have been worth its while.

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CHAPTER I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IMAGES OF GODS AND GODDESSES

In the entire universe there is only one eternal truth and that is Brahman. Brahman is the one without a second. Now, the question naturally arises – if that is so, why are there innumerable gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon ? Why is it required to contemplate on so many deities ; is not attributing divinity to so many clay, stone or wooden figures akin to an idolatrous game with dolls ? Is it not ignorance and blind superstition ? A thousand question arises in the mind.

It is the One Who is Appearing as Many

It is possible and not at all contradictory to accept that the one Brahman is in the many. This is what is unique in Indian philosophy and culture. The Vedas expound the principle of the One and yet the very same scriptures abound with adulatory references to Indra, Varuna, Agni, Yama, Surya etc. Yāshkāchārya, the renowned Nirukta scholar, opines that the Vedic gods are mainly three—Fire on earth, Indra in the subtle sphere and Surya in heaven. Others say that in each sphere or Loka there are eleven gods adding upto thirty three. Again in the Rig Veda itself, mention is made of 3,339 gods. The number went on increasing until in the pre-historical period we come across 33 crores. Nay—even that figure is crossed when the deities of folk lore and nature are taken into account. Even today, each village corner has a place (sthan) for its particular local god. To us the entire universe is the abode of God. Is it but little wonder that each detail is a manifestation of that One ? But never once has it been forgotten that this diversity rests on the one principle of unity. Varied are its expressions. This idea has come down to us by word of mouth through the generations and is termed Sruti. The Rig Veda and Brihadaranyak Upanishad both say the same

thing in unequivocal terms. Later the Puranas and Tantra built up their pyramid of rituals and chantings founded on the one base. In the Sri Sri Gita, Lord Sri Krishna reveals to Arjun the many splendoured myriad sides to His one Self. Sri Krishna says that "As Purushottam I am One but the devotees worship me in many forms according to their inclinations". In Sri Sri Chandi, the Universal Mother addresses the demon Sumbha—"Oh Sumbha ! You accuse me of fighting with many forces against your lone person. But in this world I am alone. Where is the second ? These female Shaktis have all come out of me. Behold ! I absorb all in me and stand before you alone."

There is no end to the examples that can be cited. Through the ages, for thousands of years, savants and sages by stern discipline, meditation and study, have all arrived at the same conclusion. Starting from Vedas, Vedantas, Puranas and Tantras, all schools of thought have converged at this one point.

Is it Logical to Find the One in Many

In philosophical term identity of Brahman is two-fold — 'Swarupa' and 'Tatastha'. As the former, Brahman is without attributes, form, relativity and action. Brahman is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, beyond all subjective objectivity. But again Brahman is also finite, having qualities and form, creating, preserving and destroying—the Ishwara and Lord of Creation. The restless waves and the calm depths of the water are all layers of that one ocean. The tossing surfs delude us and we cannot fathom the still silent leagues below the turbulence, The gods too, when they merge into Brahman, have no separate existence. But when the equilibrium breaks and a desire rises for mainifestation the One shapes into many. It is a game of the Self with Itself, like a string running through the pearls. From the Primal Cause, the golden womb (Hiranya-garbha) gives birth to the egg, creating subjects. He creates it as Brahma ; He preserves it as Vishnu ; simultaneously there is the action of destruction going on. Birth means death. Today's creation will merge

into tomorrow's destruction and from that night will emerge the dawn of new beginnings. Maheshwar presides over destruction. Creation, preservation and destruction are the three fold works of Brahma following myriad paths of diversity. This intricate pattern cannot be easily comprehended, for infinite are the twists and turns of the flowing river. It is the saints and aspirants who have captured the infinite in countless finite names and forms. They have never remained content with only the three forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar. In each breath of life they have felt His presence—the unseen puppeteer pulling the strings behind the stage. From the very moment of birth the Supreme One is adulated as the manifestation of motherhood—the goddess Sashthi. Sitala delivers us from physical, spiritual and natural pain and suffering. Olai Chanda, Manasha, Dakshinroy, Bono Durga, Shoni, Vipattarini are all popular and familiar deities. The names of Saraswati, Viswakarma, Lakshmi and Gandeshwari are connected with learning, skill, agriculture and commerce respectively. Ganeshwar is the god of mass integration and Kartikeya symbolises military might. Durga epitomises the orgainsed national spirit at war against divisive forces of evil. Surya and Agni stand for warmth ; Varuna for water ; Indra for rainfall and Annapurna for a rich harvest. Analysing these, we find that they are but sub-divisions of the trio—Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar, creating preserving and destroying the universe. The seed of the banyan tree is extremely small—a tiny dot. When it first sprouts there is a three fold manifestation—the roots and two leaves. From such humble beginnings it arises to be the gigantic tree giving shelter to tired mankind. Likewise in the beginning there was Brahma—the One without a second. Then this Being became three, creating, preserving and destroying. From these again, branches and sub-branches forked out to form an intricate tapestry work nourished by the austerities and penance of innumerable saints and aspirants. Each brought under his fold like-minded souls who sought shelter in their chosen one—their Ishta Devata. Nirguna Brahma took on the attributes, mixed these qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas in

various proportions and manifested diversity. For instance the same person may be husband to his wife, father or uncle to the children, a child to his parents, a friend, comrade or subject. Yet the person remains the one same individual. If this is possible in our daily life why should it be illogical in the case of God ?

The Finite in the Infinite

Brahman is without name and form, but it is not so with the gods. Why is the Infinite encased in the finite and why are we so anxious to give a nomenclature to That which is nameless ? Although the matter has always been discussed over and over again it will not be irrelevant to recapitulate the issue.

Firstly let us remember that we are all trapped in the cage of our bodies and abide in this world of name and form. Thus with our limited restricted intellect we cannot conceive of the Vast which is beyond the horizons of our knowledge and intelligence. But nevertheless we nurse high hopes. Like imprisoned inmates of the jail we look out longingly to the freedom beyond the confining walls ; being dwarfs we attempt to catch the moon !

Blessed are the saints and sages of Bharat who have shown us the path to use this very mind and its logic to reach the Infinte. They realised that at one leap it is not possible to reach the peak of realisation and know the One. There are steps to the roof and each one must find out which rung of the ladder he is standing on. The lessons are to be prescribed according to the grades of the student. Can a person who has just learnt to read and write the alphabets sit for a post-graduate examination ? But after years of steady step by step progress such an endeavour is possible. Apart for a few exceptional souls, the level of spirituality of the general mass is at the kindergarten stage. Their intellect, retentive capacity, aptitude, eagerness, selfcontrol and efforts leave much to be desired. But the Aryan Rishis were anxious for the upliftment of the masses and they had a deep knowledge about human psychology. They knew that without a concrete shape and form their minds would be without an anchor. So the

first step was to acquaint them with name and form. The child quickly learns the alphabets if names are added to sound, like 'A' is for apple and 'B' is for ball. Without the picture image, just symbols and sounds confuse the novice. This method way towards knowledge is much more result-oriented than the fear of the cane. Similarly the limits of names and forms will take us to the realm beyond it. There is no other option for the aspirant—these are the first steps.* This principle is based on solid reasoning and not on shifting sands of delusion and superstition. It is by his own compassion that the One allows himself to be thus imprisoned within the narrow confines of our human intellect.

Cinmayasyādwitīyasya niṣkalasyāśarīriṇḥ ।
Upāsakānāṁ kāryārthaṁ Brahmaṇo rūpakalpanā ॥

Not only in Tantra but during the Pauranic era, for the same reason there were the concepts of many gods and goddesses. Although in the Vedic age there is no reference to any god having a fixed shape and name, in the hymns of the Puranic era the eyes, ears, nose and even beards of the gods are described. These gods move about on chariots and horses. Varied are their weapons, vehicles and physical shapes. These images are not the caprices of any ordinary artist but realisations of sadhaks who by stern ascetism crossed the barriers between the finite and infinite. The lotus with the thousand petals, bloomed of its own accord in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, in the hearts of these saints. Does the sky have any shape or form ? And yet myriad glowing planets light it up. Similarly in their search for the One, these saints saw the luminous gods dancing against the background of the infinite. In the mirror of their Realisation, the Infinite reflected Itself. Each detail of the gods—their complexion, clothes, weapons and carriages have a deep significance and import. Those who deride these images as only dolls and

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* *Uttamo Brahmasadbhāvo dhyānabhāvastu madhyamaḥ ।*
Stutirjapo'dhamo bhāvo Vāhyapūjādhamādhamā ॥

idols are steeped in dull ignorance, Ofcourse it is also true that many who worship these images do not care to know the significance and inner meaning. Too much time and energy are wasted on the externals such as competition, pomp, extravagance and feasts. Who cares to dive deep into the depths ? Sadhak Ramprasad sang "Is the Mother shaped only by clay ?" Deluded are those who seek nothing but the excitement of competiton. Deprived of the blessings of Her who is seated within the clay image, these foolish ones wallow in games with mud and clay. Their organised pujas are in vain—all the efforts end in smoke and turns to dust. The path is there, if only one does not get lost in the maze. Nevertheless it must be admitted that this is the first easy step forward for the beginner. There is no end to the sufferings if one wants to reach the Infinite in one jump. Thus did Sri Krishna advise Arjuna.

Kleśo'dhikatarasteṣāmavyaktāsaktacetasām |
Avyaktā hi gatirduḥkham dehavdbhiravāpyate ||

In the 12th chapter Arjuna asks Sri Krishna, which is the better of the two—worship of God with form or God without form? Sri Krishna replies that for the general mass it is better to worship God with a name and form. It is true that some, by virtue of their penance and austerities, realise the One in all, but the majority cannot reach this stage. Practice is necessary. Gradually the mind stops being restless and the natural inclinations and past impressions are replaced by something higher. This state too must be transcended to arrive at the point of absolute which is beyond all relativity. So the first step is with images. The child plays with dolls and in later life this game becomes a reality. A time will surely come when the aspirant will no longer require to mediate on the image. This is the realisation of Bharata. The universal Mother came as Ramprosad's little daughter to mend his broken fence. She surrendered to the call of Sri Ramakrishna and came alive in the stone image at Dakshineshwar. Swami Pranabananda, the great saint, had at the tender age of five, realised Narayana in the holy balsam tree,

and Consciousness in the Durga image worshipped in the house of the kaviraj. There are innumerable such instances in the annals of Bharat's spiritual history. It is through the worship of name and form that so many sages came into being. If that path is abandoned, a night of despair will descend and Mother Bharat will become barren. No more will she produce rishis and savants. We would have dug our own graves. Bharat Chandra Ray, the bard of Bengal sang—"Leaving the gold nugget what is it you carefully tuck into the folds of your dress ? Will this emptiness enrich you ?" How many realised souls are amongst those who propagate against image worship ? It is easy to be a fanatic but rare are souls of conviction and faith.

The Worship of Images is the Worship of Consciousness and Principles

Gods and goddesses are not dull matter and idols, but stand for consciousness and ideas. Standing before the image do we ever say—"Oh doll of clay I bow to you. Fulfill my desires" ? Never ! Rather we pray to that Consciousness to descend into the image. All this is very clear if we take the pain to study in detail the hymns and litanies. Later this shall be studied at length but at present only a brief reference will suffice.

The fair, pure, stainless Saraswati is Knowledge and Speech, granting us Liberation. Brahman, upholding the kamandulu (urn), has to his left the symbol of yajna, and in front all the Vedas. He is flanked by his female energies Savitri on the left and by Saraswati on the right. Viswakarma is the divine architect having eight attributes. Vishnu is the keeper of the flocks in this universe—the invincible upholder of truth, omniscient and omnipresent. Agni god of Fire is the energy running through the vein of creation. Surya, the traveller, destroys dark ignorance and sin. Indra of the thousand eyes is grace and beatitude guarding the directions. Yama, the lord of Death, gives us the fruits of our works. Lakshmi is goddess of prosperity and our liberator. Sitala cures disease and soothes with her healing touch. Manasa

enriches the mind and prepares us for Supreme Knowledge. Shiva is the God of gods, the primal One and the original Seed. He frees us from fear. Durga protects the ten corners, destroys evil, upholds creation and grants us our just desserts. Ganesh crowns our efforts with success. Kartikeya manifests military might and is the destroyer of enemies. From all this it is transparent that each deity represents a particular form of energy and this is the deep significance behind the various images. If we learn to properly tune our way of thinking then no longer will the idols be mere dolls of clay. It will be replicas of consciousness like a mirror reflecting the Sun. The figures will come alive and be as much real as you and me. The enigmatic smile of the deity will light the flame of knowledge in our hearts and its magic touch will make our existence overflow with the honey of immortal nectar.

The Vehicles of the Gods (Vahana)

We have already seen how each god is a manifestation of a special type of energy, thought and principle. It is not that we are discarding the concept of consciousness and principles for dull matter and idols. At the primary stage it is not easy to grasp abstract principles since the image before us neither talks nor responds. How then shall we go beyond it and understand the true nature, self and greatness of the One?

There is a solution. Notice that accompanying each god is a vahana or an animal on which the deity is supposed to travel. This is a conception prevalent from Vedic times. The gods and their vahanas are paired in the following manner :—

Saraswati	Swan
Lakshmi	Owl
Yama	Buffalo
Shiva	Bull
Durga	Lion

Ganesha	Mouse
Kartikeya	Peacock
Sasthi	Cat
Agni	Goat
Viswakarma	Elephant
Paban	Deer
Indra	Airavat-elephant
Surya	Horse
Sitala	Donkey

Various creatures are paired with different gods. Why has it been thus imagined ? The author's interpretation is that each creature expresses the special nature and characteristics of its god. Let us analyse.

We fashion the image and formally establish a living-force inside it. Whether actually this happens in all cases is a matter of doubt. The subtle consciousness of God cannot be so easily got within our reach—it is not easily perceptible. But nevertheless there is an easy way out. The subtle eludes us but we know how this principle moves around. The vahana of the god is right there before us. We live with them and very often they are indispensible in our day to day lives. These animals too depend on mankind. In this way, we come to be intimately acquainted with their nature and movements. What I am trying to say is that nature itself is the subtle living manifestation of the secret of God. Discussing about the vahanas we stumble upon the principles that the animals represents. It is to be observed that the selection and pairing is not arbitrary but rather it has been done carefully. The vahana matches the god. Understanding the creature we reach the deity. Let us cite the example of Saraswati and her swan. The form and movement of the swan is closely associated with the pursuit of knowledge. It is said that the bird can differentiate between milk and water ; it can move with ease on

land, water and air ; its feathers never gets wet. Studying these characteristics of the swan we begin to understand the real nature of Supreme Knowledge. We shall deal at length on this in the chapter on Saraswati. Likewise, from the nature of the owl, buffalo, bull, lion, mouse, peacock etc. we are acquainted with the principles behind the images of the corresponding deities. At this point it should also be noted that these animals are not just man's helping hands but through them we learn lofty principles and touch the sphere of spirituality. Should we not then be eternally grateful to them ?

Both the deity and the carrier are but symbols. First it is required to understand the vahana and then proceed to the image of the god. Look at the vahana and then perceive with unblinking eyes the divine figure. The animal has shaped your mind to take in and to be capable of realising the god. The primary obstacles having been thus removed the time is now ripe for meditation.

The Non-Communal aspect of the Worship of Gods

We have already said that the gods symbolise the cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. This universality is also maintained in the external ritualistic details. It is however true that communities have evolved around particular gods and friction amongst devotees (Vishnu worshipping Vaishnavas ; Shiva worshipping Shaivas ; Surya worshipping Sauras : Ganesh worshipping Ganapatyas ; Shakti worshipping Shaktas ;) are not unknown. Nevertheless, these squabbles rarely took on ugly proportions, because from the Vedic age itself the underlying tone has been that of unity. This was not confined only to abstract principles and theories but was active in the field of ritualistic practice. As an example it may be cited that it is customary everywhere to start the puja of each god with the worship of Ganesha and the other five gods. That apart it is a must to salute the gods of Directions, of Planets, of Gateways, etc. These gods are invoked not only to allow worship of the main

deity, but also to illustrate the main theme of a united country. The rituals and forms of worship have been stipulated keeping in view this harmony between communitites. Another thing to be noticed is that Ganesha is the first amongst the five gods. He is the Lord of the masses. And it is to the people that we must first pay homage. The idea is that there will be no progress if we divorce ourselves from the mainstream of society, ignore its welfare and stagnate in isolation, concerned only with individual liberation. It brings with it grave consequences. Through the worship of all the gods, the principle of unity in diversity comes alive.

The Varied and Multifaceted Benefits of Worship

We have seen how through the worship of the finite we aspire to reach the infinite. Its blessings and fruits are not confined to the realm of subtle spirituality but are manifested on the mundane plane also. It reaps a harvest consisting of health, wealth, prosperity, happiness, victory, valour and beauty etc. The various disciplines of Bharat's life embracing agriculture, industry, politics, defence and integration, rest on this solid foundation of thought and cause it to slowly transcend to higher levels of spirituality. The gods are worshipped for heavenly pleasures as well as for liberation or moksa. To the Mother we pray—"Grant us beauty ; grant us victory ; grant us fame." We pray to her to guide us through the turbulent waves of life and give us success. Then again that same Devi grants us knowledge. It is she who binds us to earthly matters and again it is she alone who helps us to transcend it. King Surath excelled on the mortal plane but the merchant Samadhi tasted of the nectar of Realisation. Like Durga, the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati and the gods Shiva, Vishnu etc. can also satisfy the twin aspirations of the devotee for material and spiritual gains. But there are many gods whose field or action is limited. They may grant special earthly boons or clear the passage to heaven but Liberation is beyond their powers. But from a total approach

we may say that individual gods help us to climb each rung of the ladder. In a comprehensive way our four fold desires are satisfied. If we follow our inherent nature and tune it towards the gods, follow certain rules and works (dharma) then we will gain wealth (artha) as well as the objects of one desire (kama). If we totally surrender, then and then only God holds our hands and bears the load even of spiritual aspirations (moksa).

In the Vedic age fire was worshipped and in the age of the Puranas and Tantras, God was worshipped in the pitcher, the scroll, the image or in a piece of stone or fossil etc.

Ingredients for Worship

We have already discussed the fruits of our works because that is man's primary concern. It is the fruits that encourage man on to work. But it must be remembered that to get anything one has to give something. The gods too give after receiving offerings ; they think of our welfare when we turn our thoughts to them. It is through this mutal relationship of give and take that we ascend the steps to reach the supreme goal. Thus the question is—what shall we offer to the gods ? What will please the gods ?

The offerings are to be two fold—external and internal. The externals may be five, ten or sixteen etc. The internals are feelings, devotion, love, respect, industry, intensity, concentration and self-surrender. Fragrance, incense, flowers, lamps and edibles are the five external offerings. Offering is also made of water to wash the feet, for ablutions and for bathing ; honey, asana or a seat, clothes, ornaments and adulations are also offered. The devotee arranges these according to his means, so that worship never becomes an unreasonable burden.

What is puja ? The idea behind it is the usual manner in which we welcome guests. After greeting the visitor we arrange for that persons toilet, rest, repast etc. Likewise the spirit is invoked in the jar, picture or image and keeping this idea of welcoming the guest in mind, offerings are accordingly made.

Through the gross we try to reach the subtle. In brief this is puja. But it is not as easy as it sounds. Mechanical chanting of verses, ringing of bells and making offerings will serve no purpose if it is not accompanied by deep devotion. Sincerity is the key note of the offerings. Shortcomings in the externals may be overlooked by the gods, but if sincerity in spirit is lacking then it will be just a game with mud and clay. This sincerity will be expressed through respect, devotion, love, intensity, integrity and self-surrender. In the Gita, Sri Krishna wants from his devotee simple items like leaves, flowers, fruits and water.

Patraṁ Puspaṁ phalaṁ toyaṁ yo me bhaktyā prayacchati |
Tadahaṁ bhaktyupahṛtamaśnāmi prayatātmanaḥ || (9/26)

But what he really desires is devotion. Worship without respect, devotion and feelings is actually ego-centered and not god-oriented. This ego, clouds the glory of the divine Sun. In this type of worship the externals are there, but behind it there are no subtle lofty principles. The human body itself contains the ingredients for puja. In it there is smell, water, heat, wind, space and intellect, seated in ascending order from the base of the spinal column. The devotee has everything within him—he does not have to search elsewhere. If he looks inside, the aspirant will find in the temple of his heart that all arrangements are ready and the bells are ringing. This is mental worship. Each represents a principle. The lotus of the heart is the seat of god ; the river of his thoughts is water to wash god's feet ; the mind is an offering ; space is god's dress ; smell is his fragrance ; heart is the flower ; life is the lamp ; sounds are the ringing vibrations of the bell ; the wind is the fan ; the senses are the dancers ; lust and anger are the sacrifices killed on the altar.

Hṛtpadmāsanaṁ dadyāt sahasrāracyutāmṛtaiḥ |
Pādyaṁ caraṇayordadyāt manastwarghyaṁ nibedayet ||

This worship is without parallel and is used both in the worship of Shiva and Shakti

Ātmā twaṁ Girija Matiḥ
Sahacarāḥ prāṇaḥ śarīraṁ gṛhaṁ |
Pūjā te viṣayopabhogaracanā
Nidrā samādhisthitiḥ ||

Sancārah padayoḥ pradakṣiṇavidhiḥ
Stotrāṇi Sarvā giraḥ |
Yat Yat karma Karomi
Tat tadakhilaṁ śambho tadārādhanam ||

"Oh Sambhu ! You are my soul. I turn towards your beloved wife, daughter of the Mountain ; my five senses are your comrades ; my body is your abode Kailash ; all the material gains I acquire are for you to be established ; my sleep is a merger at your feet ; my daily movements in the mundane world encircle you ; all my utterances are about you ; all my activities centre around you."

What a beautiful prayer ! It is overflowing with love and intensity. Not just the externals—the aspirant sees his whole being as an offering. He has acquired the skill of turning everything, for all times, Godward.

Each Step of the Devotee is an Act of Worship

The above hymn on Shiva unfolds the wide all embracing idea behind ritualistic worship. God must be worshipped either in the sanctuary of one's heart or in the temple outside, but in neither case is it the last word. In each motion of existence and in our daily footsteps this thought must echo. Thought and practice must be in harmony and not contradict each other. The acid test of belief is our activity. "Whatever I do is an offering to you"—if I am to live in this belief then it must manifest in all my thoughts, action and behaviour ; it must envelope me in my dreams, sleep and speech. All existence, whether good or bad, becomes an offering when the devotee surrenders to God his total being. In this way the bonds of all petty attractions weaken, effects accumulated in past lives begin to fade, the heart gets

pure and the soul begins to glow in its pristine purity. Fire burns to ashes lust and greed, making the aspirant more and more ready to receive the Supreme. The main aim of worship of the gods is to attain godhood. This will become clear when we analyse in details the forms and sequence of internal and external worship.

CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL ORDER AND RULES OF WORSHIP

Before starting worship, a certain sequence is followed. The body and then the surroundings are symbolically cleansed with a sprinkling of water ; an objective is determined ; the seat of worship is purified ; subtle obstructing forces are removed ; the holy jar is set up ; offerings laid out ; elements appeased ; female energies invoked ; breath controlled followed by meditation ; invocation ; establishment of life force in the image ; mental worship and special offering ; bathing and offering of honey, incense, fragrance and edibles ; japa or repetition of holy words ; lighting the lamp and fire of yajna ; obeisance ; circling the image and self-surrender. In the Tantric and Pauranic traditions animal sacrifice is performed. Apart from the general, there are special rules applicable to each particular god. The general principle underlying these details is that the four fold paths of devotion, knowledge, yoga and Karma or works are integrated. Purification of the elements and breath control are parts of yoga ; inner-worship is based on knowledge and works ; devotion consists in obeisance, circlings and offerings. So puja of an image is not mere doll's play - it is worship of knowledge, devotion, yoga and work (Karma) ; it is how it is applicable to various levels of realisation. One thing should be specially noticed - before invoking life-force into the image, the worshipper awakens conciousness in his own body. If the Self in the self is not awakened then who will arouse the God ?

Purification of the Self and the Surroundings

The externals and internals are purified - body and soul are cleansed and prepared. Purity is the primary ingredient because cleanliness is next to godliness. Water is held in the right hand which is cupped to look like the ear of a cow. By three special movements of fingers, the mouth, nose, ears, navel, heart,

head and armpits are symbolically cleansed invoking the name of Vishnu. Next the environment around is purified because one cannot be pure and clean in isolation cut off from the surroundings. So these too have to be brought in tune with the sadhak's endeavours. By uttering Vedic chantings the aspirant is made to feel that the whole atmosphere is vibrating all around with all that is good and conducive to progress. The Vedic saints and the entire universe seem to participate in this worship. The use of antiseptic cowdung, floor and temple decorations, lighting of fragrance and incense etc. are externals on which the seed is implanted. The heart of the worshipper is now ready to set upon his secret desires - his samkalpa for worship.

Determining the Goal of Secret Spiritual Desire (Samkalpa)

A main part of puja is the secret spiritual desire or samkalpa. It is ritualistic to determine it in the following manner. Till seeds, balsam leaves, special kusha grass, haritaki fruit and scented flowers are immersed in a copper-alloy vessel filled with water. Without this ritual the fruits of puja cannot be attained.

Saṅkalpena binā Rājan yat kiñcit kurute naraḥ ।
Phalañcālpālpakaṁ tasya dharmasyārddhkṣyo bhavet ॥

Rather it may be said that half the efforts of religious exercises are wasted.

Satyahīnā vṛthā pūjā Satyahīno vṛthā Japaḥ ।
Satyahīnaṁ tapo vyarthamūṣare vapanaṁ yathā ॥

Some scriptures harshly chastise puja without samkalpa because it is like planting of a seed in the desert. In Mandukya Upanishad the words tapasya or austerities and satya or truth are used simultaneously, but more importance is given to truth or satya. Whether in the search of Self or God, the first pre-requisite is the secret desire of samkalpa. It is this that guides the aspirant step by step towards the cherished goal. The founder of

Bharat Sevashram Sangha had rightly said - "He who is determined in his samkalpa and his resolution has success within easy reach. He who has understood this essence and is determined never to give up his samkalpa and resolution can well become the supreme conquerer."

Purification of the Seat (Āsana)

The first concrete step towards the materialisation samkalpa is to sanctify the seat. A triangle is drawn and flowers are offered. The asana is placed on it with the words -

Om pṛthwi twayā dhṛtā lokā Devī twaṁ Viṣṇunā dhṛtā |
twañca dhāraya māṁ nityaṁ pavitraṁ kuru cāsanam ||

"Oh Mother Earth ! You uphold the Universe and you in turn are supported by Vishnu in the incarnation of a tortoise. Support me eternally and sanctify this asana."

There is a double meaning to this act. Firstly the asana is no doubt purified. Secondly the aspirant remains unwavering and steady in his resolution by the influence of the all supporting power of Mother Earth. In this way the foundation is made strong. Patience is compared to the steadfastness of our earth. Swami Pranabananda said - "The greatest forces are patience, perseverance and toleration." Lack of any one of these will cause one to falter from the path. Thus the worshipper, with the help of Mother Earth, remains glued to his seat, determined and resolute. No fear or danger can unseat him. Until the goal is reached he may perish on this asana, but even if the world around him collapses, let not this seat throw him out.*

For the purpose of meditation, the asana is of supreme importance. If one uses the same asana to meditate and count the

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* The same resolutions inspired Gautama Buddha.
Ihāsane śuṣyatu me śarīraṁ
twagasthimāṁsaṁ pralayañca Jātu |
Aprāpyabodhiṁ bahukalpadurlabhāṁ
naivāsanāt kāyamataścaliṣyati ||

beads, certain vibrations surround it which helps the mind to concentrate as soon as one sits on it. No longer does it require any extra effort. The asanas of great saints are themselves objects of worship. Swami Pranabananda said that he himself could worship his own asana, in view of its own greatness.

Removal of environmental obstacles

The seeker has to face many obstacles which detract him from the path of worship. There are natural calamities against which God is there. But there are other evil vibrations which need to be countermanded with stern measures. Water is sprinkled all around the seat together with chanting of certain sounds (Astrāya Phat). Then the left foot kicks the ground thrice to remove obstacles on it. Lord Shiva is invoked to keep away all that is evil.

Om apasarpantu te bhūtā ye bhūtā bhuvi saṁsthitāḥ |
Ye bhūtā vighnakartāraste naśyantu śivājñayā ||

Five ingredients comprising of grains, sandalwood, ash, grass, rice etc. are scattered and thenceforth the aspirant feels strengthened after these rituals. The atmosphere seems to be cleansed and ready.

Setting up the Holy Urn

God is first invoked in the holy urn and therefore this item must be beautiful, pure and undamaged. According to one's means the jar may be of gold, silver, copper, brass or an alloy. The clay urn is always of high esteem and it must be filled with water. Water symbolises life and it is in water that life-force is invoked. Five varieties of grain are placed on a clay mound on which the urn is placed. Five or nine jewels, five leaves, flowers, an uncut fruit decorated with vermillion and covered with a piece of new cloth, are all kept on the jar. The gods are prosperous and grant us wealth, happiness, peace and realisation and that is why the deity is invoked in rich overflowing pitcher. The hymns that are chanted point to these ideas.

Om sarvatīrthoudbhavam bāri sarvadevasamanwitam |
Imam ghaṭam samāruhya tiṣṭha deva (devi) gaṇaiḥ saha ||

Water symbolises all the holy pilgrim spots of the land and the jar is the infinite captured in this finite form. The worshipper prays for his wishes to be granted like the overflowing urn.

In Indian thought the pitcher filled to the brim is a symbol of great importance. No ritual can start without this. In the Devi Purana a detailed account has been given. When nectar came out of the churning of the oceans, the gods could not find a suitable vessel to contain it. An urgent message was sent to the divine architect Viswakarma. Taking from each god his or her particular skill (kala) Viswakarma shaped the exquisite pitcher or kalash.

Kalām kalām gṛhītwā vai devānām viśwakarmaṇā |
Nirmito 'yam surairyasmāt kalastena ucyāte ||

It's mouth is Brahma ; Maheswar is the neck ; Vishnu is the base ; the female energies constitute the centre and the other gods grace the sides. The four faced Brahma himself has sung the praise of the Kalash in which is present all the rivers, streams and oceans of creation. Thus the holy jar itself is a holy symbol of divinity.

A General Offering

This follows the laying of the holy urn. It is a ritual purifying water which stands for cleansing the self. With this water the worshipper makes himself and his offerings holy. Thus although it is termed 'small' the underlying principle is of great significance.

First the triangle sketched on the ground is worshipped as the Tortoise upholding creation. On this firm foundation, with the chanting of 'Aum', is laid the holy jar filled with water. By uttering the three letters a, u and m, 'Aum' is pronounced. This Aum, mantra stands for the different layers of the horizon - ten of fire, twelve of the sun and sixteen of the moon, which are the

abodes of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer respectively. The Aum flows from these three and in its waters swim the swans – the various gods and goddesses. This Aum is the fountain and the source and that is why the worship of it on an overflowing pitcher is of great significance.

After this, the water is thrice worshipped. Fragrance, flowers and the stalks of holy kusha grass are placed on the hand which is shaped to resemble a cow to signify nectar. The fingers are made to look like a fish and hook, and then later as the sky to invoke the waters of the seven holy rivers - Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sindhu, Saraswati, Narmada and Kaveri. In this way the water in the urn is electrified with the fire of Brahma and is transformed into the immortal principle. After thus invoking it ten times, this water is sprinkled on the worshipper and his surroundings.

A golden bridge of puja or worship connects the knower with the Known. In this small but significant ritual of the water, this idea finds expression. Step by step the rituals manifest this central theme.

Self-purification (Bhutasuddhi)

Now we have reached a very important and interesting point in our discussion. Only by becoming one with God, a man can worship God. "Devo bhūtva devam yajet." Basically this idea is from Tantra philosophy, but can be noticed in Vedic worship also. There is an intermingling of Vedic, Tantric and Pauranic in the rituals observed and hymns chanted. Tantric tradition goes into details regarding evil spirits but Vedic customs on this issue are relatively brief. The main idea however is the same.

Bhutasuddhi is an yogic exercise wherein the gross animal body is symbolically destroyed and the worshipper takes on a subtle divine body. But this destruction and creation cannot be observed by the ordinary naked eye. It needs introspection. By yogic integration this union between man and divinity is effected.

Firstly the worshipper joins his palms and makes an upward circular motion moving from the left towards the right. It is as if he is circling a lamp while chanting "Aham Saḥ" touching the vital points of his body starting from the spinal base and moving up towards the centre of the head where the animal-man meets god-man. The gross, consisting of mind, ego and intellect, the five sense organs and five motor organs merge into the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether. Within seconds the "I" that was, is no more - it has dissolved. That "I" now takes on a new glowing identity and becomes one with the Self. By special methods of breath-control and chanting of sacred mantras this is effected.

First the god of wind is invoked. Wind dries up the body — the body of flesh and blood, together with his evil spirit. Then the ensuing fire burns to ashes the gross body. It is as if the sadhak himself construes a cremation ground within himself. By exhaling through the left nostril the ashes of that dead body are thrown to the winds. Next the god of water is asked to sprinkle, cool and cleanse the last of the remains. By this voluntary destruction the aspirant is now ready to receive the flow of nectar which comes in a flood. He touches his forehead and sounds the mantra associated with the fair moon. The flowing beams shape a new body which is extremely firm and strong. With another mantra this strength is established in the heart and vibrations begin to flow around the central idea that "I am He". These things are of course easier said than done and cannot be achieved without the guidance of a proper guru. But although difficult, it is not impossible. If even a part of this is exercised with sincerity then some spark of the divine lights up the soul of the devotee.

Mātrikānyasa

Mātrikānyāsa relates to the Mother Saraswati, the incarnation of 'Śabda-Brahma' — the Supreme Divine sound and her body consists of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabets. Simul-

taneous with the destruction of old gross body after the 'Bhutasudhi' a new holy one has been founded. Now, the aspirant is to put all the fifty letters (Varna) in the vital parts of his body along with the six isoteric circles (Chakra) within him and thus an unbreakable bond is established with Goddess Saraswati. Then unto him all the hymns (Mantra) come alive in the real forms of the divinity invoked. However, the time to establish God is ripe only when the aspirant has gained full mastery over himself.

Breath-Control (Prāṇāyām)

Controlling of the breath is an important part of worship. Pranayam is the scientific process by which a person learns to control one's breathing. The link between the breath and the mind is very close. And without mastery over the mind, worship is futile. The aspirant must be like the fish swimming gracefully and effortlessly in the depths of the deep ; like the fish the aspirant must be unblinking and pinpointed in his concentration. Perhaps because of this, the figure of the fish is often referred to in the rituals. The sign of the tortoise too is pregnant with import.

Nāśnanti dardurāḥ śīte phaṇinaḥ pavanāśanāḥ |
kūrmāścaivāṅgagoptāro dṛṣṭāntā yoginomatāḥ ||

Yogins have taken their cue from the frogs who starve in winter ; from the reptiles who live off air and from the tortoise who withdraws its limbs and manages to survive for many long years. In the animal world the tortoise is adept at holding its breath. This is a reason for its longevity. (The world traveller Captain Cook had presented the King of Tonga with a tortoise in 1777. This creature lived 189 years and died in 1966. It is ofcourse unknown how old the tortoise was when Cook captured it.)

The main point at issue is the importance of controlling breath. Opinion is divided as to whether one should do it before or after bhutasuddhi. Pranayam is a part of bhutasuddhi but it is

done separately also. The female and male gods are addressed as 'hring' and 'om' respectively. Pranayam consists of the three steps of inhaling, holding and exhaling the breath. Four counts of inhalation is followed by sixteen counts of control and eight counts of exhalation. The number of japa to be done, is matched accordingly. While practising pranayam it is customary to sit upright with the body resting in a straight line with the head and neck. No other thought, except that of the beloved Divine One, should be allowed entry. Pranayam is a gradual process and should never be a hurriedly enforced practice. An easy rhythm must begin to vibrate to allow the self to tune in with the Divine.

Pranayam is to be followed by gestures with fingers and other exercises related to various parts of the body as described in the Sastras.

Meditation (Dhyān)

Bhutasuddhi, matrikanyas, pranayam etc. have cleansed and prepared the worshipper to move away from the mundane. He has atlast acquired the merit to sit for meditation.

Meditation is a kind of mental exercise. The image that is described in the mantra or hymn must be established in the heart. No other thought should be entertained. The sign of the tortoise and offerings of sandalwood paste and flowers signify dhyana. Like the tortoise, the externals are withdrawn into the self and only the chosen deity reigns supreme. Until the full figure of the beloved is established, meditation should not be discontinued.

Invocation

Invocation follows meditation. To invoke means to call. I want the object of my dreams to come to me and each god has a special dhyan-mantra or hymn.

From the Vedic age this has been the customary ritual and the person who invokes the god is known as Hota. In course of

time, the deity was no longer invoked in the fires of the yajna but only in the image. However, the yajna is not altogether obsolete but is a part of the rituals.

The first ingredients required to summon the gods are the strength and consciousness of the self. The energy flowing through the Sushumna column of the spinal cord establishes the beloved in the heart. The hands offer flowers of salutations, but it is the consciousness of the self that is of prime importance. The devotee has to arouse his latent divinity to acquire the right to call upon the divine. He can then rightly say - "Come here and stay here steadfast and close to me, my beloved." The infinite allows himself to be captured in a finite, definite, particular image.

Awakening of the sight and life in the Image

The savants of Bharat have dared to invoke the Infinite in images of clay. In no other country has this been attempted. But those who have failed to do so are loud in their criticism of Bharat. Bharat knows that nothing is without consciousness. If the darkness of one's own ignorance is removed, then everything around lights up with knowledge. The touch of Midas turns all to gold. On an auspicious moment the sight of the image is etched. This is no work for the weak, for only the strong can dare to take part in this ritual. Little wonder then that the founder of Bharat Sevashram was always present with his disciples at this hour. The priest only uttered the mantras but the force behind it was Swami Pranabananda himself. Affectionately pointing out the shortcomings of some he used to say - "I have invited none. You are welcome to go if you so desire. I will depart only after infusing this image with the spark of divinity. With unparalleled boldness and conviction he stood firm in his resolution and invoked the gods. With this he was able to inspire new spirit into a dying nation.

Thus the image lights up with the touch of divinity from a realised sage. In the image the idea of universality finds expres-

sion. This exercise may be compared to the blowing up of a gigantic bomb from one tiny spark. Thus the parallel between the spiritual and physical world is not unfounded and without a base.

The moment of etching the eyes and establishing life-force into the image is poignant with emotion. Devotees eagerly wait to participate. The atmosphere becomes electrified with divine ecstacy. The mascara from the holy lamp is used as an eye-liner with the stalk of a bel-leaf. After this comes the moment of making the image come alive. With fingers shaped to symbolise leaping flames, the priest touches the heart of the image with a bundle made of rice and grass and utters the mantra 'aum āṁ hṛṁ croṁ'. Five Vedic mantras awaken five forces in the deity and that which is made of clay becomes an incarnation of Consciousness.

Worship in the mind.

Here we once again recapitulate the importance of mental worship which we have already discussed. The external worship is only an outward expression of the internal and is something intimate and private belonging to the worshipper. Thus the poet sang - "Keep the beloved Shyama close to your heart. Let no one but me and my counsciousness be a witness to it." The devotee, by the fire of his zeal can make-up for all the shortcomings of the external worship. Mental worship awakens the inner consciousness to make it capable of realisation. Without this mental exercise, externals are futile.

External Rituals

Even after admitting the importance of mental worship, the necessity of external rituals cannot be denied. The use of fragrance and other ingredients are essential and this needs to be discussed.

We are terrestrial beings and our affections and attractions are mundane. Man's five senses run after the five external objects of touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste. Trying to turn to the divine we find this natural sensory inclination to be the greatest hurdle which we try, but fail to overcome. To find a way out we take the help of rituals.

The ingredients for worship consist of items like Pādya (holy water for washing feet), Arghya (offering of eight articles as Kushagrass, Barley-corn, white mustard, rice etc.), Madhuparka (honey, milk, curd, clarified-butter and sugar kept in a copper vessel), flowers, sandal paste, fragrance, light, raiments, ornaments, ablutionary, oblations, Achmaniya (water for cleaning mouth) and bed for rest. These are the externals of worship. Actually these are what we enjoy in our day to day lives. If we offer our favourite requisites to the gods and then take it back as a 'prasad' or blessing from god then the whole tone changes from crass consumerism to a refined savouring of life. The wild plant causes indigestion but if we cook and garnish it, then it becomes a gourmet. In similar manner, sense and sense-objects too can become divine. Shiva kept the poison in his throat and served us nectar. By partaking of the nectar of 'prasad', carnal attractions gradually begin to fade and our consciousness awakens. To take of anything without offering to the divine is akin to thievery – so says the Gita.

Repitition of the Name (Japa).

After external offerings comes japa. Meditation is mental worship, Pranayam is worship through control of the breath, Yajna is worship through karma or work and Japa is verbal worship. It is customary to mentally repeat the holy name on a specified seat, without being restless and to let the mind dwell only on the image of the beloved deity. Guru and God must merge into one. At such a time it is necessary to be alert to disallow sleep or drowsiness to catch one unawares. The japa can be exercised on beads (seeds of a special tree - rudraksha) or on

the fingers. Our Sangha-guru, Swami Pranabananda, said that it is ineffectual to do japa without keeping count.

All the good effects acquired from observing japa are to be offered at the feet of the supreme. Thus we must withdraw from the fruits of external and internal worship and proceed onto total self-surrender.

Ārātrik

Aratrik means the waving of fragrance, lamp, conch shell filled with water, bel leaves, flowers and a fan (chamara) made from the tail of the Himalayan cow etc before the deity. The other names for Aratrik are Niranjan and Dwipabartan. Aratrik compensates all the shortcomings of worship, says Shiva to Parvati.

Mantrahīnaṁ kṛyāhīnaṁ yatkṛtaṁ pūjanaṁ Hareḥ |
Sarvaṁ sampūrṇatāmeti kṛte nīrājane śive ||

Aratrik is of great importance. During the external worship, offerings were made of five gross materials but during Aratrik the five subtle potential elements called tanmatras are surrendered to the Divine. According to Saṁkhya school of Philosophy the light symbolises colour (Rupatanmatra), the conch shell filled with water stands for essence of taste (Rasatanmatra), fragrance and flower represents essence of smell (Gandhatanmatra), the fan is essence of touch (Spar'saṭanmatra) and the ringing bells typify the essence of sound (Śabdatanmātra). Thus the subtle-most savourings of our senses are offered up to God as a final act of love.

Obeisance

Puja starts with cleansing or achman and concludes with pranam or obeisance. Pranam is a physical gesture of surrender. It may be panchanga consisting of five parts of our body - arms, knees, head, breast and eyes. Ashtanga Pranam comprises of eight parts - legs, hands, knees, breast, head, eyes, speech and

mind. In ashtanga-pranam the entire body and soul is laid down at God's feet and thus it is the greatest.

So far we have offered five gross and subtle elements, five sense and motor organs etc. but the self is still to be surrendered. This self is my greatest offering and to it none can compare. In this act of pranam this self is totally surrendered to become a realised and free Self.

Surrendering to and Encircling the Deity

The last ritual is to surrender and encircle the deity. It is customary to encircle the goddess once (or thrice), Vishnu four times and Shiva in a half-circle curve. By it the gods are pleased and the aspirant chalks out a definite route for his life. Even after realisation the sage carries on with his life for the welfare of others. But henceforth all his movements radiate around his chosen god. Truly now he can say - "Oh Shiva ! Each footstep of life encircles you". From henceforth he remains untouched by works (karma) and its fruits, for while awake or asleep or in a dream, his mind, body and intellect all gravitate around the Supreme.

The worship of God lifts man up to a higher level of existence. This is why no amount of criticism has been able to eradicate this custom from Bharat. Swami Vivekananda said that in this country Mother Kali will never refrain from savouring goats and Shiva will never tire of riding his bull. As we proceed, analysing the gods, gradually the gates of knowledge will unlock their secrets and surprise, faith, thirst and eager respect will overwhelm us.

CHAPTER III

SARASWATI

Hymn

Taruṇs'akalamindorvibhrātī s'ubhrakantiḥ
Kucabharanamitāṅgī sannisaṇṇā sitābje |
Nijakarakamalodyallekhanīpustakas'rīḥ
Sakalavibhavasiddhyai pātu Vāgdevatā naḥ ||

Hail to Saraswati whose complexion is as fair as the young moon, whose heavy bosoms are round and full, who is seated on the white lotus holding in her hands a pen and book. May she, the goddess of speech protect and grant us prosperity.

Mantra

Bhadrakālyai namo nityaṁ Sarasvatai namo namaḥ |
Veda-Vedāṅga-Vedānta vidyāsthānebhya eba ca ||

Incessant unbroken obeisance to Bhadrakali ; repeated obeisance to Saraswati, & obeisance to vedas, Vedangas & all that is knowledge.

Salutations

Yā kundendutuṣārahāradhavalā yā śvetapadmāsanā |
Yā Vīṇāvaradaṇḍamaṇḍitabhujā yā śubhravastrāvṛtā ||
Yā Brahmācyutaśaṅkaraprabhṛtibhirdevaiḥ sadā vanditā |
Sā mā pātu saraswatī Bhagavatī niḥśesajādyāpahā ||
Sā me vasatu jivhāyāṁ Vīṇāpustakadhāriṇī |
Murārivallabhā devī sarvaśuklā Saraswatī ||

Fair as the kunda flower, as the snow capped ranges and as the moon, she is seated on the white lotus holding the musical bina. Attired in white, she is eternally saluted by Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar and the gods. May she, who totally removes all

signs of gross inertia, protect us. May she, who holds the bina and the book, who is the beloved of Hari, who is an incarnation of all that is fair and white, be firmly seated in my speech.

Saraswati Represents Totality

From the various hymns and chantings we get the following image of Saraswati. The fair goddess with large lotus-shaped eyes, holding the book and bina is seated on a white lotus. She is the goddess of the Vedas, Vedangas and Vedanta and negates all traces of dark ignorance, sloth and inertia. Beloved of Murari, Brahma and the other gods salute her ceaselessly. She blesses and grants us boons.

It is also said that she rides on a swan, is stainless, ever pure, overflowing in wisdom and it is she who can grant Liberation to the seeker. We may now discuss how the Vedas describe her.

Saraswati in the Rig Veda

In the Vedas a triple image of Saraswati can be traced. On the earthly plane she is Ila, in the subtle world Saraswati and in the heaves she is Bharati. These three layers or worlds which together make up the universe. The light of Fire on earth, of Indra in the subtle world and of the Sun in heaven manifests itself as Saraswati. As Knowledge and Consciousness, she is omniscient. The flow of her illumined nectar connects the stars and planets as it bridges creation. It pervades not only the three worlds but the seven layers above and seven below, comprising of the fourteen zones. She illumines the dense, coagulated dark masses. When this flame lights up in the inner soul of the aspirant, all shreds of ignorance are shed and light floods each nook and cranny of his being. This light is Brahman ; this light is the primal sound 'Om' ; this light is Saraswati. The word Saraswati is a feminine rendering of the term saras, which stands for light ; that which is illumined has to be fair and white.

In the Vedas Saraswati is invoked as the greatest among the goddesses, the mothers and the rivers, for it is she who manifests divinity, motherhood and life-giving waters of the rivers. Saraswati is an incarnation of all that is illumined, divine and spiritual. She nourishes and cares for her ignorant helpless children with the overflowing nectar of her knowledge. Saraswati is the sound-vibrations of the gurgling waters, beating out the rhythms of our subtle and gross feelings ; dancing around the emotions of love and sorrow ; captured in the expressions of prose and poetry.

It is well to remember that a river or 'nadi' is not only so for the water it holds but also stands for the sound it vibrates. The term 'Nadi' originates from 'nad' or sound. As the goddess of speech and expression, Saraswati is an incarnation of the rivers ; she is the subtle sound of Pranab, the metre of the Vedas, the grammar of music (ragas, raginis, rhythm, pitch, pause etc.) the vowels and consonants and the ancient hymns of Vedas and Tantras. Unparalleled, she flows as nectar in our inner being and also as the river across terrestrial hills and plains. Light has taken shape as water. According to the scriptures sarash may also mean water (Bhrigu Upanishad 9). Light and water embrace each other. From space there is air ; from air arises fire ; water comes from this fire. As light finds its fulfilment in water, so too she, who is the Illumined one, condenses as water in swirling waves of dance and sound, for the welfare of mankind. Spreading out her green skirts she has taken under her wings suffering creation. Having bathed and fed them, she also nourishes their spiritual aspirations.

Bharat's ancient lores frequently refer to the river Saraswati which had once enriched the fertile plains of Punjab. Its banks reverberated with Vedic chantings of countless hermitages. In sylvan rural surroundings hemmed in by forests, the Aryan rishis soared majestic spiritual heights. It is the holy Saraswati that is the true mother of Bharat's unique civilisation and culture of India. Here was lit the first path-finding lamp which is still

glowing to show us the way to eternity. Here man found his first language taking shape from the primal sound of Pranab. The river and the goddess are but the two names of the One Mother.

Pāvakā naḥ Sarasvatī vājebhirvājinīvatī |
Yajñaṁ vaṣṭu dhiyāvasuḥ ||
Codayitrī sūnṛtānām cetantī sumatīnām |
Yajñaṁ dadhe sarasvatī ||
Maho arṇaḥ sarasvatī pracetayati ketunā
Dhiyo viśwā virājati ||

Madhuchhanda, son of sage Viswamitra in the famous Gayatri metre (Rigveda's first mandal's, third shukta's, 10th, 11th, 12th Riks) adulated both the mother and the river.

In the 10th rik, Saraswati is referred to as 'Pabaka' which has been interpreted by Sayan to mean the one who washes off our sins and also as the river that cools and cleanses our body and mind. Secondly she is said to as 'Vajnibati' or the one who gives us food. Rain causes the seed to sprout ; clouds bring rain ; the fires of yajna form the clouds and the goddess is the queen of the yajnas. As a river too, Saraswati fertilises her banks to feed mankind with golden harvests. Thirdly Saraswati is said to be Dhiyavasu. This too has a double meaning. The goddess of the yajna blesses with wealth and prosperity. The river too promotes trade and commerce.

The 11th rik says that it is with Saraswati's sanction that the Vedic sacrifices are performed. Firstly she is one of the deities of the yajna. That apart, hymns, chantings, fires and sacrifices are integral parts of the yajna. Saraswati is the source of speech ; she is the fire of illumination and it is by her grace that the harvest is reaped to be offered to the gods. Thus Saraswati embraces the entire yajna and excluding her nothing can be executed. The same can be said of the river because in the Vedic age all the settlements dotted her banks and naturally it was here that the rituals of yajna were performed.

In the first two sentences of this rik, it is explained that Saraswati is the principal deity in yajna. As an incarnation of

speech and expression she makes chanting and singing of hymns possible. As an embodiment of knowledge, she guides our consciousness to follow the prescribed path. It is she who is Knowledge and Wisdom. The waves dancing on the river Saraswati beat the rhythm of incantations of the wise Aryan settlers who followed the course leading to knowledge and realisation.

From the 12th rik onwards Saraswati's greatness as a river becomes more explicit. Sayanacharya admits this without hesitation. Even though we cannot always glimpse the sea, by observing the works of the river and direction of its flow we are constantly reminded of the existence of the ocean. The flowing current of the river is the flag forging ahead showing the way to the grand union. (In Rig Veda's mantra 7/95/2 it is said that the river Saraswati falls into the sea. But that geographical position is changed now. Stretches of sand yawn across the tract where the meeting had once taken place, because the sea changed its course. Pandit Avinash Chandra Das in his "Rigvedic Culture" has written—"I naturally inferred that in Rigvedic times there must be a sea, occupying that part of the desert tract of Rajputana where the Saraswati now loses herself in its sands.")

The rik starts with a description of the river Saraswati but ends by musing on the goddess Saraswati. Actually the entire rik draws an analogy between the deity and the river. Devi Saraswati is divine and for us mortals her depths are fathomless. But near her banks we get a sprinkling of that knowledge of the One who is beyond all form, quality or action. The current of her works flows on ceaselessly, and the little we glimpse of it whets our appetite to know more. But without the grace of the devi, her depths cannot become understandable to the ordinary human intellect.

The Vedic Goddess shapes into an Image

In the Vedas Saraswati is manifested spiritually as the subtle goddess and empirically as the gross river. The river manifests

the goddess in all her aspects and in that age the river itself was the image of the divine Mother. But the call of time and pressure of population made the Aryans move onto new pastures and spread across Bharat. Unable to take with them the flowing river, the sages divined an image of the goddess in their hearts which they later shaped into form. Today it is this image, sculputed from the meditations and skill of rishis, that graces our hearts and homes.

The light of knowledge and the stainless purity of the water has fashioned the white raiment of the image. The Vedic chantings reverberating on the banks of the river Saraswati, were imprisoned in the strings of the musical bina which the image upholds. She is Binapani and also she is Pustakasri, for the ancient scriptures found expression in speech and verse in that age of grace.

Why is the white lotus a seat for Saraswati and the white swan her carriage ? Innumerable white swans sailed through hundreds of white lotus flowers on the sacred waters of the river. Thus the lotus and swan came to be closely associated with the goddess. Therefore we see that even as a symbol of knowledge the image of Saraswati still reminds us of the once flowing vibrant waters of the river.

Saraswati in the Puranas

The Vedic goddess of the yajna sacrifice manifests herself in myriad forms in the Puranas. But in no way has the main current of thought been interrupted–rather it has been brought out more boldly.

In the Devi Bhagawat (first skanda—7) Saraswati is said to be the Primal one, a third branch of Prakriti. She is the goddess of speech, intellect, learning, knowledge etc. She is the source of the rhythm of music. According to Devi Bhagawat, Brahman and Sri Krishna were the first to initiate the worship of Saraswati.

Further it has been said that in the heavens of Vaikuntha, Ganga, Lakshmi and Saraswati were the wives of Sri Hari. Once the co-wives squabbled and cursed each other. The outcome was that they were to become rivers on earth and cleanse man of sin. Thus the mutual curses of the goddesses turned out to be the best boon to creatures on earth. Having gained the three divinities in this condensed form we are blessed, purified and liberated and our motherland has becomes fertile and enriched.

In some Puranas Saraswati is said to be Brahma's spouse and in others she is the consort of Hari. Devi Bhagwat has acknowledged all the diverse opinions and sought a synthesis and rapprochement. Different aspects of Saraswati are manifest as the wives of Hari, Brahma and also as the river. The same explanation holds good of Kamala or Lakshmi. One part of her is the beloved of Hari, while another is the holy balsam plant. Ganga too divides herself as wives of Hari, Shiva and King Santanu, and then again as the river.

In the last episode of Sri Sri Chandi under Markendaya Purana's Sri Sri Chandi, the great goddess who destroys the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha is referred to as the famous Maha Saraswati. She has eight arms blessing and displaying the conch shell, wheel, plough, mace, spear, bell, arrow etc. Even in this manifestation of the war-goddess the basic principle of her symbolising knowledge, has not been overlooked. She imparts knowledge of the One without a second to the confused ignorant titan Sumbha.

In the Prabhas part of Skanda Purana, a fascinating tale is recorded of the river Saraswati's descent. Sri Vishnu had ordered Saraswati to bear Barabagni to the Sea. At first she was reluctant to comply but her father Brahma advised her to participate in the works of the divine. So she took the form of a river, bore Barabagni and began to flow towards the nether world. Overburdened and weary with her load she sometimes became visible as she surfaced. At one stage a huge mountain blocked the path and wanted her hand in marriage. Tactfully she

defeated his endeavours and flowed on. At Pravash she branched into five fingers, responding to the call of the Sea and seeking the salvation of four rishis engaged in tapasya. In this way the one Saraswati forked into five, redeeming mankind from the sins of slaughtering brahmins, drunkenness, adultery etc.

The above story actually sketches the map of the river. Sarmur is the source of the river before it meanders into Ambala district. At times it disappears into sandy tracts. Finally a thin stream emerges encircling countless temples at Thaneswar and Kurukshetra. Thence it moves onto Patiala and merges with the river Ghagra. The Puranas have woven a web of tales around Saraswati's appearance and disappearance. Hindus believe that although the Saraswati is a subterranean river it meets the sea at the Pravash confluence. Ancient Bharat had witnessed the lighting of the first lamp of spiritual knowledge. Sparks from it spread all around dispelling fears from the darkness of ignorance and sin. Again and again mankind was given the chance of redemption. In this special sense Saraswati has not only five but even a thousand distributaries. Tracing the course of the river we arrive at Devi Saraswati who is the very incarnation of knowledge.

Not only geography but history also peeps through the Puranas. The waters of the river had turned scarlet with the blood of wars. All are familiar with the Kuru-Pandava struggle. Vamana Purana narrates that many years previous to this, Vashistha and Viswamitra had stained red its shores. By Viswamitra's command, Saraswati had swept away Vashistha and brought him to the hermitage of the former. Having got his enemy within his clutches, Viswamitra began looking around for his weapons. Divining Viswamitra's intentions and afraid of being involved in such a crime, Saraswati swiftly deposited Vashistha on the opposite bank. A furious frustrated Viswamitra cursed her—"As you have cheated me, let your waters become red with blood." Although Vasistha got temporary respite, per-

haps later there was a bloodbath. Most probably this is the fact behind the fiction.

Brihaddharma Purana narrates the story of how Saraswati the goddess of talent, creation, energy, language and knowledge first inspired mankind. Immediately after creating Saraswati Brahma told her to reside in the hearts of bards. But Saraswati was at a loss as to how she being the singular, could reside in the expressions of so many. Brahma then advised her to go around the world and find out the person who was most worthy of her honour. He would then be the first poet whose footsteps others will trace. So it came to pass that in the Treta Yuga, Saraswati discovered by the banks of the river Tamasa, the sage Valmiki surrounded by his disciples. At that time he was immersed in deep anguish for a loving pair of birds that had been separated by the cruel arrow of a hunter. Saraswati entered the voice of the Muni just when he was bursting to express his sorrow. The Devi's advent did not go in vain for the intense feelings of Valmiki broke forth into poetic form.

Mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhām twamagamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ ।
Yat krouñcamithunādekamavadhīḥ kāmamohitam ॥

Since 'shoka' or sorrow gave its brith, it came to be known as 'sloka'. The immortal epic Ramayana is composed in this style. The inspiration of the goddess as well as the depth of the rishi's feelings have both remained immortal in this timeless epic—The Ramayana.

In the Vayu Purana it is said that, when after the end of an epoch, Rudra destroyed everything, Brahma plunged into deep meditation driven by a desire to be re-created. At this point appeared the divine Saraswati, goddess of sound, upholding the Universe. Brahma created her out of his own being and it was through her that Brahma initiated a new spurt of creation.

Many look at this from a twisted angle assuming the relationship between Brahman and Saraswati as that of father and daughter. It seems horrendous that Brahman should desire his own child. The matter needs to be considered.

Firstly it must be made clear that the creative urge mentioned here is based on a principle and has no taint of carnality in it. Brahman is characterised by two attributes—the rajas of activity and satya of truth leading to work and knowledge respectively. If we sieve out the satya element only, this is symbolised by Saraswati. She is pure knowledge. In this sense Saraswati is an offspring of Brahman. The desire that courses through Brahman when he beholds the illumined Saraswati is the thirst for knowledge. Taking into partnership what has evolved from his own being Brahman ventures into creation. And this is exactly what man is doing in every day life. When we execute a project we manifest the perfect partnership of our knowledge with aptitude for work. Brahman too could not make himself effective simply by force and energy. It had to be backed by knowledge. Without the partnership of Saraswati as Primal Nature and Universal Mother, Brahman could not evolve. Looked at from this angle there appears to be no hint of perversion. There is nothing degrading about the self's thirst for knowledge.

In Garuda Purana, eight types of Saraswati's manifestation are mentioned. In her is manifested reverence, extraordinary powers, skill, industry, contentment, nourishment, powers of influence and inclinations. In Tantra these eight are known as integration, truth, purity, knowledge, memory, aptitude and wisdom. In Tantra too Saraswati is goddess of expression and speech. Her divine body is made up of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabets and she is known as Mother Saraswati. At the time of Matrikanyas, when the priest ritually invokes the female divinities, he touches symbolically various centres in his outward and inner being, making himself awakened in speech and sound. He acquires the right to worship by first identifying himself with Saraswati. This has already been discussed in the second chapter and does not require furthur elaboration.

Tara devi of Tantra is but another name for Saraswati. When Devi Bhubeneshwari is worshipped, a corner of the triangle that

is sketched, is marked for Saraswati. She is also worshipped in the eight-fold lotus.

The Spiritual Significance of and Salutations to Saraswati

Although the Vedic hymns have already been discussed a little more detailed account will be illuminating.

Repeatedly Saraswati has been associated with the colour white because she is the one who removes darkness and reveals to illuminate. Her complexion is as fair as her apparel ; the lotus on which she is seated is white ; the swan which carries her on the path of light is also white. Saraswati's glow dims the combined whiteness of the moon, the kunda flower and the snow. The seeker of truth must therefore be purified internally as well as be cleansed externally to be worthy of receiving Saraswati.

Saraswati holds the musical instrument—the bina. The goddess and her bina epitomises the principles of expression and sound. The bina throbs with the sacred Pranab mantra of Om. The four Vedas are but the rhythm and pause of the Omkar. The first step of the seeker is therefore to tune in with this divine orchestra because whenever that is broken life becomes a putrid load beseiged by the vultures of ignorance that pick out the eyes of light, leaving man in darkness.

Saraswati seated on a white lotus grants supreme knowledge lifting us beyond sloth and inertia. Spiritual awakening follows the gradual blooming of knowledge and the ego is likened to the closed petal which responds to the kiss of the Sun and bursts forth into a thousand blooms. The final stage can be reached only when the self becomes the Self and the jar of life spills over with fulfilment leaving nothing more to be desired. Saraswati is the goddess of spiritual attainment and the lotus symbolises the awakening of the inner being. She is worshipped in spring because it marks the end of the winter season when nature had slumbered in a cold embrace ; when the hours of daylight were less compared to that of darkness. Spring whispers a message of

awakening of new life that trembles through creation. The flirting breeze, swaying grass and fluttering new leaves and flowers, rhyme with the melody of the birds. Mother Earth is locked in an embrace of creation. No wonder then, that this is the best time to invoke Saraswati. Her full breasts spill over with the nectar of supreme, sustaining, nourishing knowledge as she swiftly descends seated on her white swan. Capturing her mood in an image of clay we garland and welcome her in our midst.

Devi's Vāhana the White Swan

Saraswati arises before us alternately as the river and then again as the goddess. Innumerable white swans used to frolic on the waves of the river flowing with its current. To the imagination of the poet the goddess appeared to be riding the bird. Later they gave form to their thoughts and sculpted the image of the goddess. The fair Devi of illumination came to be matched by the pure white swan.

Vahana symbolises the divinity of the god it carries. The animal is at first tamed and then it serves the deity whose characteristics it manifests. Thus apart from the externals there is a subtle inner bridge connecting one with the other.

Let us recapitulate what has already been said. The swan moves freely on land, air and water. Similarly knowledge is all pervading entering the seven heavens, seven nether worlds, as well as the deep recesses of hearts of men.

Secondly the swift flying swan, seen from below appears to be suspended and stationary in space. Likewise the spiritual savant has two aspects. From an empirical angle he has gross form, movement and qualities. But a subtle perception leads to the realisation that he is without form or attributes and is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. The sadhak appears to be sitting in meditation with eyes closed ; engaged in austerities with his senses stilled ; in the realm of the subtle ; swiftly ascending spiritual heights of knowledge ; breaking all limits of speed. Without the blessings of the Goddess of Learning this is not possible.

Thirdly it has been said that the swan is supposed to be capable of discriminating between water and milk. In other words it can sieve truth from the false. In the world of knowledge this has special significance. This empirical world is a mixture of light and shade and the seeker must move away from darkness towards the light of truth.

The fourth characteristic of the swan is the formation and arrangement of the feathers which never get wet. This has a lesson both for the aspirant and for the realised souls. The seeker will remain untouched by the damp clutches of the mundane world while moving forward towards the goal. The realised one also, after salvation will remain floating in life on earth, for the good of mankind and nothing can weigh him down to the murky depths.

Thus the swan instructs us about the nature of knowledge, the way to knowledge and about the man of knowledge. Hence it is most appropriate that this majestic bird should be the one who bears Saraswati.

Lastly it needs to be said that both in the Tantras and Upanishads the "hamsa" is the symbol of knowledge. It is also the sound that escapes with each intake and exhalation of breath. The one who is conscious of the name being taken with each moment of existence is the Realised One—the Great Swan, Param Hamsa.

CHAPTER IV

BRAHMĀ

Hymn

Brahmā kamaṇḍalūdharas'caturvaktras'caturbhujaḥ |
Kadācidraktakamale haṁsārūḍhaḥ kadācana ||
varṇena raktagourāṅgaḥ prāṁs'ustuṅgāṅga unnataḥ |
kamaṇḍaluvarvāmakare sruvo haste tu dakṣiṇe ||
dakṣiṇādhastathā mālā vāmādhas'ca tathā sruvaḥ |
Ājyasthālī vāmapārs've vedāḥ sarve'gratah sthitāḥ ||
sāvitrī vāmapārśvasthā dakṣiṇasthā sarasvatī |
sarve ca Ṛṣayohyagre kuryādevis'cacintanam ||

Brahma with four faces holds sruvas, rosary beads and the kamandalu (metallic or wooden water pot) in his four arms. He sometimes sits on the scarlet lotus and sometimes on a white swan. The upright Brahma has a red complexion and is surrounded by sacrificial vessels, the Vedas, seers and the goddesses Savitri and Saraswati. This is Brahma's image of worship.

Brahmā in the Puranas

The image of Brahma that is conjured makes us conclude that he is a Vedic deity, although the Vedas do not refer to him as Brahma by name. We first come across Brahma's name in the Puranas. The four Vedas Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva are expounded by the four faces of Brahma and his four arms hold the Vedic vessels for sacrifice. Thus Brahma appears to be the god of Vedic works and yajna. The two goddesses Saraswati and Savitri who flank Brahma are Vedic deities of knowledge and metre. Thus although Brahma is a Pauranic god, the Vedas live in him. He is a pure manifestation of the Vedas.

In the Puranas, apart from certain minor roles, Brahma is mainly depicted as the creator. The Smriti and Pauranic litera-

ture are rich with descriptions of creation and this is the keynote of the introductory chapters.

Creation flows along two streams - prakriti and vaikriti. First it went along a one natural path and then forked out. In the beginning Brahma alone was there. What was not there was absent ; what was there was not there ; there were neither earth nor heaven ; nothing high or low ; there was no water ; there was no difference between immortality and death and between day and night. (Rig Veda 10/129/1, 2) only one existed. But He did not want to remain alone. He expressed a desire - let the One be Many. This is the seed behind the myriad multiplicity of creation. This is the first movement away from primal nature and the first modification and evolute is known as mahat. Here comes in intellect or buddhi. From it evolves ego and the five elements - ether, air, fire, water and earth. Water too evolves out of the flow of Prakriti. Brahma initiates creation and stands as the symbol of the principle of water. 'Ka' means water and Brahma holds the pitcher of water (kamandalu). The concept of water is very subtle and from it has been created habitation for creation, five sense organs, five motor organs etc. The greatest contributions of Brahma are the four types of creation. Apart from mammals and plants, life comes out of eggs and cells. Mind and body multiply and subtle beings like gods and spirits are Brahma's creations. The Puranas narrates how all these came to be.

According to Matsya Purana, after the Great Destruction, the Universe sank into deep dark inertia. Penetrating this arose Brahma himself. As Narayan, he first produced water and in that water he cast the seed of creation which became transformed into a golden illumined egg. God entered it and stayed there for thousand years and that is why he is known as the Golden womb or Hiranyagarbha. He epitomises Vishnuhood, by virtue of his all inclusiveness.

From the Hiranyagarbha came out Bhagwan Surya the ruler of day, night, months and years. As the primal bhoota or

material principle Surya is known as Aditya. Next evolved sound. Reciting the Vedas, Brahma himself came forth. Following sound there came ether or boma pervading the ten directions. Following the evolution of the Directions, issued forth Time, Sound and Space gradually from the egg ; then came the mountains, clouds, lightning, rivers, pitras, manus and the seven oceans.

Other Puranas describe Narayan as the Lord, who at the time of the Great Destruction, who was floating on a sea of slumbering desire - Karanbari. Brahma is known as Padmayoni because he appeared from the lotus of Narayan's navel. Here lies the seed of the unborn One and the waters are the protective womb for it. This seed, containing the gods, pervades entire creation ; thus chants the Rig Veda (10th mandal, 82nd shukta, 6th mantra).

Tamidgarbhaṁ prathamaṁ dadhra āpo
yatra devāḥ samagacchanta viśve ।
Ajasya nāvā vadhye kamarpitaṁ
yasmin viś'vāni bhuvanāni tasthuḥ ॥

It appears that the Puranas borrowed from here the legend of Brahma's appearance from the navel of Narayan. All the qualities of the Viswakarma of the Rig Veda—as father, god, knower and creator, are present in Pauranic Brahma and are reflected in his character and activities.

In three mantras of Rig Veda (10th mandals 190th shukta) a description as regards the sequence of creation is given.

oṁ ṛtañca satyañcābhīddhāt tapaso' dhyajāyata ।
tato rātryajāyata tataḥ samudro'rṇavaḥ ॥
samudrāt arṇavāt adhisaṁvatsaro'jāyata ।
Ahorātrāṇi vidadhadviś'vasyamiṣato vaśī ॥
Suryācandramasau dhātā yathā pūrvamakalpyat ।
Divañca pṛthiviñca antarkṣamatho svaḥ ॥

(*Ṛgveda* 10/190/1, 2, 3)

It says that at the time of the Great Dissolution the only abiding truth was the eternity of Brahma. Only night and darkness prevailed. Later by the askesis and unseen wish of Brahma, came the dawn of creation. There appeared the ocean filled with water out of which evolved the Father of the Universe - Dhata or Bidhata. The first things He created were the Sun and Moon manifesting day and night respectively. In other words, till then heaven, earth, subtle worlds and space lay in the realm of imagination. Thus different worlds in one universe came into being. There is no doubt that the Vedic Bidhata is the Pauranic Brahma.

A comparison will illustrate the close affinity between Prajapati of the Vedas and the Pauranic Brahma. The Vedic rishi is Hiranyagarbha, who alone existed in the beginning ; who immediately upon coming into being became Ishwara, the one without a second. Here Prajapati or Hiranyagarbha is undoubtedly the Creator of all. He is saluted for establishing the earth and sky in their own territories. It is also said that He is obeyed by all the gods ; His shadow is like nectar ; death is his slave ; He is the lord of bipeds, quadrupeds and all other creatures ; He formed the snow-capped peaks and the oceans of water ; the directions are his arms, and it is by His blessings that the sun rises in all it's illumined glory.

Out of the boundless oceans evolved Fire, the life-force of all. Surveying everything from the waters, that Prajapati existed as the One without a second. From Him evolved earth ; limitless are His powers of retention. Yes, it is He who is the creator - none else but Him. (Rig Veda 10/121)

Elsewhere in the Rig Veda, mention is made of a rishi named Prajapati. A scene of the picture prior to creation is outlined. Speaking of the principle behind creation it is said that before it, leave alone man, not even the gods conceived of even the idea. The Supreme One alone knew of the Supreme One. He alone knew it came from where, from whom, by whom or whether at all it came to be or not to be.

In the Vedas the word 'Prajapati' has come to be associated with creation whether as a god or as seer. The concepts of universal creation and Prajapati are entwined together. Thus if we place the attributes and characteristics of Brahma and Prajapati side by side, both appear to be the same.

According to Markendiya Purana, in the beginning there came out male and female forms of satya, rajas and tamas from the wise Brahma's face, heart and legs respectively. They are in chronological order Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Sudras. The Rig-veda repeats the same regarding the four varnas or castes.

Brāhmaṇo'sya mukhamāsīt | Vāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ |
Ūru tadasya yadvaiśyaḥ | Padvāṁ śūdro ajāyata ||
[*Puruṣa - Sūkta*]

From the Great Being's mouth, arms and legs came out Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Sudras. This Great Being of the Vedas had a thousand heads, thousand legs and thousand eyes ; three of his steps cover the heavens while only one covers this earth. He is present in everything conscious or not. From His mind evolved the moon ; from his mouth came Indra and fire ; air from his life-force ; the subtle world from the navel ; heaven from the head ; land from his feet ; the directions and the creatures from his ears.

What has been said about the Great Being in the Vedas has been elaborated while describing Brahma in the Puranas. Markandiya Purana describes the manasi and khetraja subjects that evolved out of the gross and subtle, from Brahma. Amongst the manasis were Marichi, Atri, Angira, Pulasta, Pulaha, Kritu, Vashista, Bhrigu etc. Sanat, Sanak, Sanandan and Sanatana were also Brhama's manasi sons but they forever remained celibates.

Regarding the birth of man and woman it is said in this Purana, that out of Brahma's anger there came forth a being as fiery as the sun who was half-man and half-woman. Obeying Brahma the two separated and were named as Swambhu-Manu and Satarupa. The Bhagawat says that man and woman came out

of the right and left portions of Brahma. In this Purana Brahma is said to have miraculously divided himself into the two sexes as Swambhu and Sattarupa. They are our grandparents. Daksha and his wife too evolved out of Brahma, and came out of his right and left toes. In Vayu Purana there is a long list of Brahma's khetraja offsprings.

Obeying Rudra, Brahma went into deep meditation. In that state there came out from his face, the gods ; from his lap the ancestors ; titans and humans from his lower regions ; snakes and spirits came from his sides ; the birds from his chest ; elephants, goats, camels and lesser creatures from his mouth and feet ; herbs and fruits from the hairs on his body.

The Vedas are Brahma's speech. The Rigveda, Gayatri metre etc. came from his eastern face ; Yajur, Sama and Atharva Vedas & other corresponding metres issued forth respectively from southern, western and northern faces of Brahma. The heavens are his head, the sky is his navel, and the moon and sun are his eyes ; the ears are his directions and the earth is his feet. These descriptions of Brahma are similar with that of the Purusha Shuktas of Rig Veda.

What is the meaning of the term Brahma ? Vayu Purana says, that Who is the greatest, Who rests on the waters and that Who controls creation and destruction is Brahma. Brahma is the biggest and greatest. He is knowledge and is therefore Prajapati. Unmanifested he rests and so he is Purusha. None created nor preceded him and thus he is Swambhu (self - created).

Brahmā in the Pauranic Trinity

The Puranas give importance to the three gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar. Popularly it is known that Brahma creates, Vishnu preserves and Shiva destroys. Of the three, Vishnu and Maheswar are worshipped in all Hindu homes but Brahma is rarely to be found. Vishnu and Shiva have gathered around them entire sects. But where are Brahma's followers ? None flies his banner and why is it so ?

Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar are three forms of energy emanating from the one Brahma. But the Puranas, without giving due importance to this underlying truth, stirred up a hornet's nest of discord by according neither Vishnu nor Maheshwar precedence over the other in the different Puranas. The net result has been that Brahma has been sacrificed at the altar of this conflict.

Shiva-Purana says that it all started with Brahma and Vishnu. Both claimed superiority and the verbal squabble degenerated into fists and blows. At this point Shiva came to mediate in the form of a burning column of fire. Brahma and Vishnu agreed that the prime position would be given to the one who would be the first to find the end of the pillar. For the time being both gave up bloodshed and engaged themselves in the search for infinity. But both met with failure. Vishnu humbly acepted defeat but Brahma could not overcome his desire to win the bet. Brahma, the one who holds in his hands the rosary, decided to tell a lie. Loudly he proclaimed - "This ketaki flower is a proof that I have found the end of the tunnel of fire." Thus Vishnu was compelled to pay obeisance to him.

But this enraged Shiva. He came forth in his own true form from the fire and granted to each their just desserts. One he blessed and the other he cursed. Vishnu, because of his truthful simplicity, became the favourite of the masses and Brahma suffered indignity. Anger in the form of Bhairav came out of Shiva's forehead, and seized Brahma's locks of hair to cut off his head. The honest and straight-forward Vishnu now came forward as the merciful and compassionate one. He begged Rudra to spare Brahma and this made Shiva's anger cool down. But should Brahma be allowed to go scot free ? Shiva decreed that none would worship Braham on earth. Perhaps for a god, death would have been better than this form of insult. Brahma's contrite tears made Shiva relent — "Then go and be Prajapati the keeper of your subjects and the Guru of yajnas."

Once Brahma and Shiva engaged in a quarrel. The story goes that Brahma one day made arrangements for worship of Shiva. In order to test Brahma's depth of knowledge, Shiva appeared as a dog and ate the offerings. Brahma failed to see through Shiva's guise and could not realise Shiva as a four footed creature. He shooed it away in anger and perhaps also injured Shiva. Shiva then cursed him—Since you castigated me in the form of a dog you will be Kalki." Brahma however did not hesitate to promptly curse him backi in retaliation—"Since you disguised yourself to ridicule me, anybody who partakes of your leavings will become a dog."

Shiva had banned Brahma's worship and so perhaps in revenge this legend was circulated.

Thus we see that creation-preservation-destruction are the three forces of the one Brahma. Apparently the conception of destruction is contradicting those of creation and preservation but by divine law the three are pearls of the same necklace. It is a cycle of creation following destruction and preservation. Destruction must precede the repeated multifarious dances of creation. Preservation maintains the balance between these two poles. There is absolutely no note of discord between the three. All are one because their combined image is the law of nature. Param Brahma is One. But when He dons the cloak of the magician and enters on the stage, his wand creates these diversities. Joy and sorrow, birth and death, euphoria and depression are dolls for play in the hands of God. His creative forces push us onto the playground and we prepare the field. With Vishnu's blessings the game commences and absorbs our attentions, but when by Shiva's whistle of command the schedule is over, it is time to return once more from whence we came. This is the cycle of life and that is why the rhythm never falters. The Puranas may have occasionally elevated one or the other but by and large the general idea of balance amongst the three is maintained.

The Skanda Purana eulogises the harmony of the divine Trinity and says that worship of any one is equivalent to paying

homage to the other two. The rajas of Brahma, satya of Vishnu and tamas of Shiva are compared to wind, water and fire respectively. Shiva is day, Brahma is evening and Vishnu is night. Brahma is Rig Veda, Vishnu Yajur and Shiva Samaveda. The tongues of fire arising, pervading and disappearing, the symbols of the seed, feminity and masculinity, the points of navel, heart and the centre of the forehead, all symbolise Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in respective orders. In our inner being the trinity is to be worshipped as one.

Brahmā the Ruler of the Universe

The parent is the father of the child. But can his duties end here ? Does he not have to care for the child ? Brahma is the father of this creation. He too cannot pause but has to labour to preserve it. Keeping in view the welfare of humanity, even before creation, Brahma had expounded the four Vedas. The Vedas are our conscience and guide us in all spheres - merit, demerit, virtue, vice and duty. The Vedas are the leaves of this tree of life and under the shelter of its cool shade we attain peace and prosperity. These Vedas fork out into two branches knowledge and works. Works show us the path to success and heaven. Knowledge leads us to Self-realisation. Brahma holds the sruva or sacrificial vessel in one hand signifying works that lead to prosperity.

Sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ |
Anena prasaviṣyadhvameṣa vo'stviṣṭakāmadhuk ||

In the Gita (3rd Chapter, 10th Sloka) it has been said that with sacrifices (yajna), Brahma created his subjects.

On the other the white swan and rosary are pointers to Supreme Knowledge.

The two wives of Brahma, Savitri and Saraswati have special symbolical meanings. Savitri is the creating mother while Saraswati is the nourisher and sustainer.

Brahmā and the welfare of man.

The Puranas make many references to Brahma's welfare activities. When the gods were harassed and oppressed by Ravana they turned to Brahma for help, who made fervent appeals through prayers and chantings to Vishnu to descend as a saviour (Rama). It is Brahma who inspired the sage Valmiki to compose the Ramayana. Brahma comforted Sri Rama when Sita had to undergo the Test of Fire and then again when she returned to the lap of Mother Earth. Some Puranas narrate that it was Brahma who was the first one to worship Durga, out of season, in the heavens. Thus Brahma advised Ramachandra to do likewise on earth. Perhaps Brahma wanted to atone for having granted Ravana the boon of immortality. In Sri Sri Chandi when the demons Madhu and Kautav were about to create havoc, Brahma prayed to Mahamaya. She awakened the slumbering Vishnu and deluded the demons. Whenever the gods were in trouble Brahma came forward to give the lead and did not remain content only with the scriptures and yajna.

Brahma is famed for being the first initiator of Ayurveda or the Science of Medicine. It was known as Brahma Samhita.

Vidhātātharvasarvasvamāyurvedaṁ prakāśayan ।
Svanāmnā saṁhitāṁ cakre lakṣas'lokamayāmṛjum ॥

Definitely this was a remarkable contribution of his towards social welfare.

In the Devi Purana it is admitted that Brahma could dispel evil spirits and knew the art of taming others. Having acquired this knowledge from Vishnu he had passed it onto Indra. Brahma was the presiding priest at the wedding of Lakshmi and Vishnu. He was also the Hota at the yajna of Varuna.

Brahma Purana says that he appointed Sudhamba, Samkhya pada, Ketuman and Hiranyaroma to guard the Eastern, Southern, Western and Northern corners respectively. According to Brahma's ruling the following charges were distributed :-

Varuna	Waters
Vishnu	Adityas
Pabaka	Vasus
Daksha	Prajapatis
Chitraratha	Gandharvas
Vasuki	Nagas
Taksha	Serpents
Garurah	Birds
Sardul	Deers

Thus Brahma is the King-Maker.

According to Tantra the lowest circle of our body is muladhara. In this circle there is a scarlet male symbol encircled by three and half coils of Kundalini (serpentine energy) whose hue is that of the lightning. Here resides Brahma, and the point is known as Brahmagranthi. Following the advice of the guru this circle has first to be penetrated and is the primary step towards Realisation or Moksha.

Brahmā as the Creator and the Science of Reproduction

We have come to know that the universe was sprinkled with the seed of Karanbari moulded out of the inevitability of cause-effect. Out of it emerged the golden womb Hiranyagarbha. Brahma himself, taking with him this stuff which was pulsating with potentiality, entered the lotus of Vishnu's navel. The significant thing is that this womb at first came to be divided. The heavens came from top, earth from the bottom and the sky, directions and waters formed the middle portion. It again subdivided into various layers to accommodate different subjects. There was a time when the Great Egg of the Universe was a tiny cell in the all encompassing waters. The word 'anda' meaning egg has been used in Mahabharata and Manu Samhita. This egg was equivalent to the glow of a thousand suns. Brahma

manifested himself as this primal seed and his complexion was a mixture of scarlet and white. Seated on the red lotus he has for his vahana the white swan. It is difficult for all to understand the complexities of creation as described in the Vedas and Puranas, but an attempt may be made to compare it with the process of procreation as we understand it.

Let us take the example of father and mother. The male impregnates the womb of the female. The watery essence of both flows out of the exit points of each, which is referred to as swadhistan in yoga. Here resides Varuna and his vahana the mighty shark, Makar. The principle here is that of water. In the case of women other signs are there. The conch and the fish both habitate water. The maternal organ is triangular like the conch shell and the form, hue and position of the womb can be compared to the fish. Thus the seed of the father is ejaculated into the water.

The foetus in the womb swims in a bag of skin full of fluid (liquor amini). In this liquid it gradually begins to grow and take shape. According to Hindu philosophy, being or jivatma is a reflection of the supreme Paramatma. Narayan takes birth as Nara the man. The embryo floating in the fluid of the womb is like Narayan afloat on the waters. When delivery is about to take place the bag of waters bursts and the slippery fluid makes the path of exit smooth for the foetus. The shape of the female organ is like the leaf of the banyan on which Narayan is said to be floating.

The embryo is a product of the union of the male sperm and female ovum. At the onset the seeds of both combine together to form a single mass of flesh. This is known as the stage of Hiranyagarbha and has been referred to as 'anda' in Mahabharata and Manusamhita. Modern science says that this mass of flesh firstly divides into two and then subsequently into 4, 18, 16 and other countless parts. This is known as segmentation of mammalian ovum. In this way either one or two embryos are formed. Do we not see a similar hint in the Pauranic lore ?

At birth two things are observed. The navel of the infant is entwined with an umbilical cord and that is in turn attached to a flower-like placenta. We have already said that nara or man is a part of Narayan. Infact in local parlance the placenta is referred to as 'phul' or flower. Thus the navel of the pure new-born is like that of the blooming lotus of Narayan's navel and the cord is the stem. Birth is about to take place - conjure the scene. The infant resting on a floating leaf is like the foetus in the waters of the womb - the leaf being akin to the mother's female organ. Brahma resting on Narayan's navel-lotus is an exact replica of what the biology books describe. The subtle creative force is Brahma. The male sperm is white, while the blood of woman is scarlet. The two combine to make Brahma's complexion a mixture of red and white.

The Swan as Brahmā's vāhana

Two qualities can be attributed to Brahma - satya and rajas and in his image there are many pointers to this. Rajas is symbolised by his red hue, by the sruva (sacrificial vessel) of works and by Savitri on his left. Saraswati, rosary beads and the white complexion signify satya. Brahma epitomises knowledge and in the swan is combined the qualities of satya and rajas.

The word 'hamsa' is an abbreviation of the great Vedic mantra of aham sah or 'I am He'.

Brahma or knowledge, expresses and manifests itself as the ego ; and the swan is the carriage bringing it forth. Swift silent moves the swan penetrating all the spheres of heaven, earth and the waters ; wise is the swan that strains the milk from the waters. All these apply to Brahma also.

Brahma symbolises creation as well as reproduction. On the other hand the swan is a prolific breeder. Just keep a pair of swans, restrain your hunger-instincts and watch your silent home transformed by the cacophony of multiplying feathered friends.

CHAPTER V

VISWAKARMĀ

Hymn

Daṁs'apāla mahāvīra sucitrakarmakāraka |
Vis'vakṛt viśvadhṛk tvañca vāsanāmānadaṇḍadhṛk ||
Om Vis'vakarmaṇe namaḥ |

Hail to the armoured one, the brave warrior, the creator and ruler of the universe and the wondrous architect. Lift up your weapons and the sandalwood. I salute thee.

Mantra

Devas'ilpi mahābhāga devānāṁ kāryasādhaka |
Vis'vakarmannamastubhyaṁ sarvābhīṣṭapradāyaka ||

The Divine Artist with eight noble qualities ; the Engineer of the gods ; giver of boons ; Oh Builder of this Universe ! I Salute thee !

Viswakarmā in Mantra and Meditation

The identity of Viswakarma as it is found in the hymn and mantra is significant. He is a great warrior as well as a god of compassion. He is both the creator and the preserver of the universe. He holds aloft the tools of the artist but is also armoured for war. The Vedas and Puranas furthur elaborate on this unique character of Viswakarma.

Viswakarmā in the Vedas

Viswakarma is saluted in two special shuktas of Rig Veda (81 & 82), the essence of which is as follows.

In the beginning, the two worlds of earth and heaven were joined by the waters. But slowly, as their boundaries surfaced, they moved furthur and further apart. And this was the executive will of the creator.

In Viswakarma the mind is gathered and focussed together. He is the creator and preserver ; the greatest and omniscient. Despite being known by many names he is the One without a second.

He is our father whose navel holds the seed of creation and in whom rests all the gods.

His eyes, torso, hands and legs pervade all spheres and he has sacrificed himself in this yajna of the universe for the welfare of creation. He is the lord of speech ; he is as swift as the mind ; each and every effort of his is a boon. Pleased with this sacrifice he preserves and keeps us. Limited by a veil, our mind fails to understand the full majesty of his greatness.

Viswakarmā in the Puranas

He who was the creator in the Vedas is mainly the divine architect and engineer in the puranas. Contradictory legends circulate regarding Viswakarma's birth. Some say his parents are Pravash (the greatest among the Vasus) and Varavarni the sister of Brihaspati. But Brahmavaivarta Purana says Viswakarma came forth from the navel of Brahma. On the other hand the Vedas refer to Viswakarma as the unborn one. Thus a doubt arises whether the Viswakarma of the Vedas and Viswakarma of the Puranas are one and the same.

The Puranas refer to countless artistic endeavours of Viswakarma. He made the aeroplane, ornaments and other adornments. Men are inspired by this divine artist. He fashioned Agastya's residence in Kunjan Parvat, Kuber's Alakapuri and Ravana's golden Lanka. The well fortified, meticulously planned Dwarka, the capital of Sri Krishna, the ruler of the Yadavs, is described in the Bhagwat to be the work of Viswakarma. Ravana's palace boasted of exquisite gardens, vast

audience halls, galleries, artificial hills, play-grounds, cow sheds, conference chambers etc. All these bear the mark of his artistic excellence.

Tilottama the celestial being is the greatest of Viswakarma's creation. To entice and capture the titans Sunda and Upasunda, Viswakarma painstakingly fashioned Tilottama bit by bit out of each drop of all that is beautiful. The asuras came to be burnt and destroyed by the fire of this exquisite beauty. Matsya Purana says Viswakarma blesses all of man's activities from the digging of wells and ponds to the making of idols and building of houses and gardens.

Prāsāda-bhawanodyāna-pratimā-bhūṣaṇādiṣu |
Taḍagārāmakūpeṣu smṛtaḥ so'maravardhakiḥ ||

Viswakarma is said to be the inventor of the air borne craft, Kuber's Pushpakrath ; other aeroplanes of the gods were also designed by him. He fashioned new weapons for the arsenals of the divinities. The bow of Shankar, which destroyed the demon Tarakasura, and that of Parashuram with the help of which he relieved the world of the Kshatriyas twenty one times, were both crafted by Viswakarma. In Sri Sri Chandi, Viswakarma armed the goddess with the weapons parashu, kabacha etc. Viswakarma himself was a valiant warrior. After the churning of the ocean, when war broke out between the gods and demons for the Nectar, Viswakarma fought with Moi who was the engineer and architect of the titans. It goes to Viswakarma's credit that he designed weapons and put them to use.

Viswakarma is the father of the arts and skills. His son was the monkey named Nal who executed the mighty bridge across the sea for Rama to cross over to Lanka. Vishnu Purana says that Twastha, a skilled aritsan was another son of Viswakarma. Twastha's name can be found in the Rigveda, and in the Vedas and he is renowned as the divine architect. Viswakarma married the demon king Prahlad's daughter Virochana and their child was Moy.

On earth there are many painters, weavers and other artisans who fashion articles out of flowers, iron, brass, shell, wood, clay, gold etc. Brahmavaivarta Purana narrates that these communities were the children of Viswakarma and Ghritachi, the celestial dancer. Both Viswakarma and Ghritachi had to suffer a curse and work out their punishment on earth. Viswakarma himself trained his children in the various skills.

Indra, king of the gods, killed Vritta. This story can be found in the Rigveda but the Skanda Purana adds that Vritta was the son of Viswakarma.

Viswakarmā and his daughter Chitrangada

Apart from having sons as Nola, Twastha, Moy and other ten skilled in different arts of the earth, Viswakarma had a daughter named Chitrangada. Because of her, Viswakarma was carried to be born in the womb of a monkey. The legend goes that without the permission of her father Chitrangada married a suitor of her choice - King Surath. Although the groom was not an unworthy husband, the independence and wayward behaviour of his daughter chagrined Viswakarma. He cursed her : ''You shall be separated from your husband''. Divorce was not prevalent in Aryan society and therefore such an outburst from Viswakarma was not godlike but foolish like the work of a monkey. The sage Rittadhawaja advised : ''Why furthur complicate matters ? What has happened, has happened. Now welcome your daughter and son-in-law.'' But Viswakarma was stubborn in his conservative determination. Irritated the sage cursed him : ''Begone and be born in the womb of a monkey''. At this point however the sage mediated and both father and daughter were released from their curses.

In today's progressive world such instances often occur. At first the enraged parent becomes blind in anger and is foolish like a monkey. Later, on some plea, the gulf is bridged and peace is restored.

Is Viswakarmā Dual or Non-Dual ?

There has been controversy as to whether Viswakarma is the One and non-dual or is he the Dual of the Puranas. It is necessary to come to a conclusion and our opinion is that both are the same. There is no strong argument to see one as separate from the other.

It is like trying to ask if water and its coolness are separate. The unanimous reply will be - both are identical. Water and its coolness are as inseparable as fire and its scorching power. Similarly is creation apart from its beauty ? In this sense Viswakarma and his executive power are one. In each layer of creation, subtle or gross, the Creator has made his mark. The divine artist expresses himself through every minute detail of the rose petals and the patterns on the butterfly. The entire universe is his workshop. The creator and the artist are the same. In the Vedas his creative aspect finds prominence while in the Puranas Viswakarma is primarily the skilled executor. This is the only difference.

Brahmā and Viswakarmā

Are Brahma and Viswakarma the same ? This needs to be understood. Prof. Stell Kramrish in her book "The Hindu Temple" writes : "Originally, the name Viswakarma is that of the working aspect of the Supreme Principle, Brahma being its thinking aspect."

God is non-dual but two moods are attributed to Him—God-the-thinker and God-the-executer. In the Vedas both are conceived of as one but in the Puranas a distinction has been made.

In the empirical world, behind any project two actions are at play – planning and executing. This is all the more true about the Divine. If God had not made a blue-print before executing his plans, then would this majestic creation in all its minute details been perfect and unfaltering in beat and rhythm ? Brahma is when the stage of thought and planning predominates. Vis-

wakarma is when this same power becomes the executive, working out the will. The Vedas refer to Viswakarma as the one with universal arms and the greatest of all workers.

Viswakarmā Adorned with Garlands and Sandalwood Paste Upholds the Measuring-Rod

Viswakarma wearing a garland of wooden beads, is dressed with a paste of sandalwood, flowers, scent and holds aloft the measuring rod. What is the significance of this image. ?

Odour is the quality of earth – the earth which Viswakarma has created. And thus he powders himself with that very fragrance. Beauty is not just a feast for the eyes but it is the very essence extracted from the nectar of existence that stirs the core of our being. The garland of fragrant flowers signify cleanliness and our sense of aesthetics. Man-the-artist will learn of these two from god-the-artist. Purity and taste are the twin pillars of Indian art.

Why does Viswakarma hold aloft the measuring rod ? We know that meticulous and careful planning precedes actual ex-execution of projects. Everything is measured and weighed by Viswakarma. Our illustrations in this context is not a far cry. Let us take the example of human body. There is exactly a ten finger gap between the vital points - from exit points to lower abdomen; from lower abdomen to navel ; from navel to heart ; from heart to neck ; from neck to the centre of the brow ; from brow to crown of head. The calculation of other parts of the body are all worked out on the basis of this standard of 10 finger measurement. The distance from the armpit to the tip of the fingers is forty fingers ; from the waist to toe is sixty fingers ; circumference of the head is thirty fingers ; from chin to ears is ten fingers ; Not only the human body but the entire universe is ruled as it were, by the measuring rod of God. Everything has been laid out with geometric precision. For instance the distance between the sun and the earth is just perfect. The minutest miscalculation would have either frozen or scorched the earth out of

existence. Mother earth gets exactly the right amount of heat she requires. The stars and planets each whirl, on their axis, at incalculable speed but a correct distance is always perfectly maintained to avoid collison. Apart from the physical world, on the mental level too lines are drawn by the Almighty which can never be crossed. Had not Viswakarma upheld the measuring rod this creation would have met a chaotic fate.

The measuring rod can also be taken to mean the weighing scales. In East Bengal the four armed image of Viswakarma is modelled holding aloft the weighing scales, hammer and chisel. All these are the indispensable tools in the hands of the artisans.

The weighing apparatus consists of two hanging scales and a pointer-needle. The needle freezes at the centre only when both the scales are equal in weight. On the twin scales, Viswakarma displays works and knowledge, which are equalised by the needle of spirituality. In our practical life this image is an illustration. We must poise our actions of works and knowledge to centre around the inner soul. If we lean too much on knowledge then the outcome will be want and pain. But an increasing inclination towards work will squeeze dry our happiness. And if the balancing needle is absent then there will be spiritual and physical disaster. The worker, the artist, the man of commerce, the farmer, writer, poet, politician and all levels of mankind must be aware of this abiding truth. Otherwise just shouting hoarse about equality, independence, welfare, peace and universal brotherhood will end in smoke.

Resolving the Mystery Behind the Image of Viswakarmā

When these articles were being periodically published in Bharat Sevasram Sangha's monthly mouthpiece ''Pranab', about three persons, deeply attraced by the writings, came to meet the author. After exchanging niceties they came to the point. Their observation was that the images of Viswakarma modelled and worshipped nowadays were not true representations. Viswakarma does not have one face and two (or sometimes four) arms ;

he has five faces and ten arms ; his vahana (riding animal) is not the elephant but the swan. As a proof they cited the seventh chapter of Skanda Purana's Nagar Khanda and the sixth chapter (slókas 12–16) of Vasishta Purana's third khanda. They requested that their opinions should be noted.

The author was grateful to get these slokas at hand. Their views, being based on proof, could not be overlooked. Nevertheless an ancient popular image cannot be hastily negated. Fortunately a middle road of approach synthesizing both views could be found at ease. Both opinions came to be accepted.

The Logic Behind Five Heads and Ten Arms

We have already noted the difference between Vedic Viswakarma and Viswakarma of the Puranas. The image of Viswakarma that is at present worshipped portrays the artist in the god, and therefore the elephant matches this particular mood of Viswakarma. In the Vedas Viswakarma is referred to as the one without a second and therefore in this sense he can very well have a single face with two arms. But again the Rig Vedic Viswakarma is said to have universal faces, eyes and arms. How can such a concept be translated into an image ? The author says that based on the descriptions of the Skanda and Vasishta Puranas a figure of Viswakarma can be modelled with five faces and ten arms. The arms pointing to ten directions can be pointers to the boundless universe, and the five faces with ten eyes can signify the omniscience and omnipotency of the deity.

The five faces of Viswakarma are named Sadyajata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpurusha and Ishan. They face east, south, west, north and upwards respectively. Each face is flanked by the two directions of left and right. So the five faces guard the ten directions which can be taken to represent the horizons of the Infinite. The swan is the appropriate vahana of such an image of total knowledge and may be worshipped by those who follow the path of knowledge But the other image is meant for workers, artisans and artists.

The Elephant as Viswakarmā's Carriage

As far as I know, the popular image of Viswakarma being worshipped today, was initiated by the leading personality of the Karmakar (ironsmith) community, the late Keshari Roy. He began Viswakarma's worship at Calcutta. Here the question arises – why is the elephant Viswakarma's vahana ? The answer can be given from different points of view. The elephant is the most appropriate riding animal for the valiant Viswakarma, for Viswakarma the artist and for Viswakarma the creator.

Viswakarma, the creator is intoxicated with work. In a frenzy of creation he is offering himself in the yajna of works. That is why he is known as Viswakarma, the creator of the Universe. We have also seen his ceaseless effort in preserving the balance. For such a god, the elephant is the right choice of a mascot. Apart from the usual four limbs, this animal has another — the 'kar' or trunk. This is the speciality of the elephant in the animal kingdom. Because it has a kar (hand) or hasta, the elephant is hasti. Kar is the agent for work and the elephant should rightfully take up his place with the god of works – Viswakarma.

If we take Viswakarma to be a valiant warrior then too the elephant must carry him. Ancient history tells us that the elephant was the popular mount of war.

The last relevant question is – what has the elephant got to do with the world of the artisan ?

The trunk of the elephant has the unique ability to move freely and effortlessly at all angles – up, down, right, left, forward and behind. Only an artist (and not the ordinary man) has such a control over his 'kar' or hands. Skilful manipulation of hands is the secret of the artist's success. Thus the placing of the elephant beside Viswakarma the artist, is justified. Secondly, the light footfall of the heavy elephant is graceful and swift. It is an art like the step in a dance. Thirdly the tusk of the elephant is the material for exquisite craftmanship. The skin too is invaluable.

Folk lore abounds with the stories of the 'gajamukta', the legendary pearl of the elephant. Lastly it will not be incorrect to conjure up images of the beast actively participating in ancient India and abroad, in the heavy construction works like the building of huge palaces, forts, monasteries, temples, memorial pillars, promenades, gardens etc. Thus we see that the elephant is the correct choice as a vahana of Viswakarma the artist.

CHAPTER VI

VIṢṆU

Hymn

Viṣṇuṁ śāradacandrakotisadṛśaṁ śaṅkhaṁ
rathāṅgaṁ gadāmambhojaṁ
Dadhataṁ sitabjanilayaṁ kāntyā jaganmohanam |
Ābabdhāṅgadahārakuṇḍalamahāmoulim
sfuratkaṅkaṇam |
Śrīvatsāṅkamudārakaustubhadharaṁ
vande munīndraiḥ stutam ||

We salute Vishnu—majestic like a million moons in autumn, sporting the conch shell, mace, lotus and wheel, seated on the white lotus ; of spellbinding beauty, adorned with armlet, garland, ear-rings, tiara and wristlet ; the holy sign is on his chest ; possesses the Kaustav jewel and is worshipped by the greatest among sages.

Viṣṇu in the Rigvedas

The first amongst the Hindu gods, Vishnu is one of the greatest among the twelve Adityas. Since only five or six shuktas refer to Vishnu, it may be said that a very small portion of the Rig Vedas refer to him. But nevertheless, his greatness in the Vedas is beyond limit. He who is omniscient, penetrates everything and pervades everywhere. This is Vishnu. Vishnu is Gopa the keeper of the herds—the universe at large. He is the unborn One. He upholds religion and aesthetics. Like the all seeing Sun, the wise ceaselessly view him ; his devotees singing his praise seek and gain realisation at his feet.

Tadviṣṇoḥ paramaṁ padaṁ sadā paśyanti sūrayaḥ |
Divīva cakṣurātatam ||
Tadviprāso vipanyavo jāgavāṁsaḥ samiṁdhate |
Viṣṇoryat paramaṁ padaṁ ||

Scholars are of the opinion that Vishnu is another name of the Sun in the Vedas. Some say, Vishnu is the mid-day sun. The Vedas have described Vishnu to be Suparna, and is as beautiful and swift as a bird. Perhaps this analogy was drawn after observing the flight of the Sun from dawn to dusk. Acharya Shankar has interpreted Suparna to represent the illumination of knowledge as noted in the Gita (15/1,2). In another sense Vishnu is Suparna because he is the Vedic leaves of the tree of life. Vishnu is Garutman or swift like the bird. This idea was developed to model the image of Vishnu's vahana (riding animal) Garuda, the majestic winged creature

Vishnu moves in three directions and so he is Trivikram. He encircles the earth with the seven colours of light. From earth, man can view his two feet but his third step is beyond our gross senses. Shakapurni, the Vedic scholar, said that the three steps of Vishnu covered the nether world, earth and heaven. Aurnobabha commented that dawn, noon and dusk are the three movements of Vishnu. Yashkacharya has cited both these views.

Viṣṇu and the Sun are Identical

From the above we already get the hint that in the Vedas, Vishnu and the Sun are the same. Other references from the Vedas and Puranas confirm this view. In Yajur Veda's Satpatha Brahmana the severed head of Vishnu is said to be the Sun. In Rig Veda's salutations to Vishnu, hints of the Sun's annual circle and main four seasons can be found. As a proof it may be quoted that the Rig Veda refers to the ninety horses of Vishnu. To each has been given a name and speed. $90 \times 4 = 360$ and scholars say this is the annual route of the Sun. Vishnu by his own light encircles the Universe, says the Rig Veda. This light consists of the rays of the Sun.

Vishnu and Narayana are the same. Narayana resides in the centre of the solar system. Sabita and Surya are also identical in meditation.

Jabākusuma-saṅkāśaḥ kāśyapeyo mahādyutiḥ |
Rājo vāmano vālaḥ kaśyapāditeśmani |
Tretāyuge'vatīrṇo'sau raktavarṇaśca vāmanaḥ |

Jabākusuma-saṅkāśaṁ kāśyapeyaṁ mahādyutiṁ |
Dhvāntāriṁ sarvapāpaghnaṁ praṇato'smi divākaram ||

An example can be given from the Puranas as regards this non-difference. Describing the Vamana Avatar of Vishnu, Brihaddharma Purana says that like the Sun, Vishnu is the Saviour in the form of a Dwarf, the Vamana Avatar and is as red as the hibiscus flower. He is the illumined son of Kashyap. He descended to earth with the intention of destroying the demon Bali. Vishnu asked Bali to give him three steps of land and Bali agreed because Vishnu had come to him in the guise of a brahmin. But the divine Magician tricked the asura. With three steps Vishnu covered the three worlds. The Vedas have referred to Vishnu's trivikram and we can undoubtedly see its influence on the Puranas.

In the Mahabharata we find, Bhisma laid out on his deathbed made of arrows, chanting the thousand names of Vishnu. In this Vishnu is referred to as Ravi, Surya, Sabita, Jyotiraditya, Aharsambartak, Bhaskardaoti, Gambhastinemi etc. In these salutations Bhisma must have kept in mind that Vishnu and the Sun are the same.

We know Vishnu to be preserver of creation. Modern science ascribes this role to the sun. Food, life force, grace, beauty and prosperity—whatever we get is in some form or other a boon from the sun. Thus both Vishnu and the sun nourish and keep us. Both are the same because there cannot be two primal sources of energy.

The Sun and conception of Viṣṇu's Image

Vishnu holds aloft the conch, wheel, mace and lotus. His apparel is golden and his complexion is that of the fresh green

grass. A comparison can be drawn with this image and that of the sun shining in the azure skies. The sky, the sun and its rays all blend into a form that is Sri Vishnu.

Like Vishnu the sky is omniscient and a greenish blue in hue. The rays of the sun is the golden attire of the god. The priceless kaustav jewel rests on Vishnu's chest as does the bejewelled sun in the heart of the sky. The annual circular sojurn of the sun is symbolised as wheel in the hand of Vishnu.

A detailed effort is being made to establish Vishnu to be the Sun because we the Hindus, do not look upon the Sun to be a mere physical entity but as a living Truth. The dazzling rays of the Sun, however, dazzle and blind our vision and we constantly keep on asking for temporal wealth and prosperity. Blind that we are, we cannot go beyond this covering to the core of the Sun. He has covered himself with the golden impenetrable armour. We view him either as a nourisher or as a gross ball of fire. But when we open our third eye, then with his grace, we gain entry into the inner chamber. Here we come upon the peace of truth resting against the backdrop of the fierce fire. Behind Pusha or Sun is the Soul of the Being to Whom prayed the sage of Isha Upanishad.

Hiraṇmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpihitaṁ mukham |
Tat tvaṁ pūṣannapāvṛṇu satyadharmāya dṛṣṭaye |

Thus Lord Vishnu is not the invisible God but is the centre of the sun resting on a lotus, eternal and true. If we could only awaken our vision, then daily we could view Him, illumined and majestic.

Viṣṇu's Eternal Name, Fame and Power

Lord Vishnu is omniscient for there is no nook or cranny on earth where he is not present. Thus mathematics is humbled and unable to define in terms of numbers his infinite force, greatness and name. Devotees chant him by eight, sixteen, one hundred eight or a thousand names, but yet fail to touch the bottom of the

ocean that is Vishnu. But they know very well that he is the Name amongst names. Seek Him in his name for He is entwined in it.

Queen Satyabhama, not knowing this truth, tried in vain to weigh Sri Hari with gold. But when Lakshmi, in the form of Queen Rukmini, placed a balsam leaf with His name written on it, the needle tipped in favour of that scale where lay the name on the leaf. Thus His Name is greater than Hari Himself. Truly is it said that Vishnu's name reflects His majesty. Thus we too have no other recourse but to take the help of his name. Infact can man move a step without marking and naming ?

Name	***Significance***
Achhuyta	Beyond chhuti or modification. The six changes of position are birth, growth, stability, maturity, decay and death.
Vishnu	Pervades each nook and cranny of existence.
Hari	Takes away the bonds and bondages of life.
Satya	That which is eternal and true.
Janardana	(a) Destroyer of the demon Jana. (b) The masses or janagan seek Him.
Hamsa	The eternal Purusha constant in each breath of our existence, who rents apart the illusory veil of maya.

Narayana	He is the only shelter (ayan) at the time of inundation and destruction.
Keshava	(a) He is 'ka' which means Brahma, as well as Isha the destroyer and preserver. He is "kay" because he floats like a corpse on water.
Vasudeva	Vasa means abode. He resides in all vastu or matter and is the illumined manifested deva.
Hrishikesha	Hrishik is the lord of the Senses.
Adhyakshaja	He is the non-dual One beyond our senses.
Garudadhwaja	The sign of the great bird Garuda adorns Vishnu's flag.
Pundaridaksha	(a) His eyes are as beautiful as lotus flowers.
Yajnesha	(b) The great Supreme Purusha is manifest as an atom in the core of our hearts. God of all Sacrifices.
Baikuntha	He does not hesitate or show kuntha, to shower blessings on his beloved.
Dharmagopta	The keeper of virtues.
Gopala	The Divine nourisher and protector of the vedas and the universe.

Chakrapani	He holds aloft the Wheel.
Sarangapani	He holds aloft the Bow.
Gadadhara	He holds aloft the Mace.
Brishabha	His blessings continuously rain down on us.
Sriman	His beauty and grace is unparalleled.
Govinda	Only the Vedic word 'go' can make us realise His subtle being.
Bhagwan	The six divine riches of valour, success, grace, knowledge and detachment overflow His being.
Bhesaja	He is the god of Ayrvedic medicines.
Samkarshan	At the time of destruction, like a magnet he draws everything unto himself.
Mukunda	He grants muku or salvation to mundane creatures.
Pitambar	He is attired in the gold of the sun.
Sahashaksha	His eyes are everywhere.
Sahasravahu	His arms are everywhere.
Sahasrapad	His feet are everywhere.
Trikalagnya	He perceives the past, present and future.

Prababha	He is the source of everything whether good or evil.
Purushottam	Beyond decay and nondecay is He.
Dhata	He upholds and supports the entire universe.
Jnanagamya	Only pure knowledge can realise Him.
Trivikram	He travels three paths— east in the morning, through zenith at noon and in the evening to the western horizon.
Anisha	He is independent.
Udirna	He is omniscient.
Naika	He is above all differences whether external or internal and is the One. Yet again he is not-One.
Chaturmurti	He is the Supreme, the Subtle, the Nature, and He is the Transcendent.
Chaturatma	He is the mind, intellect, ego and will.
Chaturbhava	It is from Him that arises the cravings for virtues, wealth, desire and liberation.
Chaturveda	He is the knower of the four Vedas—Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva.

Chaturvahu	He is the One with four arms.
Srivatsya	His chest is silken and smooth.
Sridhar, Sripati, Srinath	Consort of Lakshmi, He is all that is good and beautiful.
Nishkal	He is beyond any fraction.
Guptahari	To energise the gods he had once performed austerities in secret at Ayodha. Near the entrance of Ayodha, the place where he had put down his wheel or chakra is known as Chakrahari.
Varenya, Barada, Manada, Purana, Kutastha, Achala, Yogesh etc.	These are some of the innumerable names of Vishnu.

Viṣṇu the Creator-Preserver-Destroyer

According to Vishnu Purana, it is Vishnu who is the greatest of all principles. He is the rajasic creator Brahma, the sattvic preserver Vishnu and at the end of the cycle He is the fierce tamasic destroyer Rudra. These are the three aspects of Vishnu with his gunas. But he is also beyond the gunas, when in a state of perfect equilibrium he rests on a bed of snakes, immersed in yogic slumber.

The sixteen names of Viṣṇu

In sickness, health, while eating or sleeping, in happiness despair or prosperity, at home or abroad, on land, water, forest or mountain—everywhere and at all stages Vishnu is our shelter and navigator. No matter in what activity we are engaged,

whether routine, social or driven by hopes and desires, we are to always seat Vishnu in the centre of our hearts.

Auṣadhe cintayed viṣṇuṁ bhojane ca janārdanam ।
Śayane padmanābhañca vivāhe ca prajāpatim ॥
Yuddhe cakradharaṁ devaṁ pravase ca trivikramam॥
Nārāyaṇaṁ tanutyāge śrīdharaṁ priyasaṅgame ॥
Duḥsvapne smara govindaṁ saṅkaṭe madhusūdanam।
Kānane narasiṁhañca pāvake jalaśāyinam ॥
Jalamadhye varāhñca parvate Raghunandanam ।
Gamane vāmanañcaiva sarvakāryeṣu Mādhavam ॥

Name	***Occasion***	***Significance***
Vishnu	Taking medicines	He nourishes the juices of medicinal herbs and plants. "Puṣṇāmi cauṣadhīḥ sarvāḥ somo bhūtvā rasātmakaḥ ।"—Gītā
Janardan	Eating	As he provides for our livelihood, we should ask (arda) for food from Him. Secondly 'arda' also means to crush. Here it may well apply to the food that we must chew and mash before digesting. Sri Vishnu had killed the asura Janardan.
Padmanabha	Sleeping	At the time of sleep, after a whole day's work, seek shelter on

		the lotus of Sri Vishnu's navel. It is from here that Brahma had emerged. Sweet will be our dreams if we too rest on the lap of the said divine lotus.
Prajapati	Marriage	He is the god of new progeny. The sole purpose of marriage is to beget worthy children. At the moment of the wedding it is well to be reminded that marriage is not for feeding the fires of lust but that it is a sacred union involving penance and discipline to repay our loans to society by returning to it worthy off-springs.
Chakradhar	War	He is the god of War and the wheel is a concentrated form of eternally revolving valour. Meditate upon it to be inspired, to banish impotency and to awaken the lion in one's arms.

Trivikram	In foreign lands	Vishnu had encompassed the world with 3 strides. If his feet are everywhere then how can I be on alien soil ? Where is the foreign land ? Thus He makes me at home everywhere.
Narayana	At Death	Generally we erroneously think that at the hour of death we become lost. But this is so only for those who do not know how to seek shelter. He is Shelter for all creatures great and small. He is Narayana floating on the ocean of karanbari.
Sridhar	Union with the beloved	The burning fires of lust cease to scorch if we think of Sridhar as the one who holds in his breast, Lakshmi—the goddess of grace and prosperity. When we see our beloved to be a deification of the Lord then love and only pure love prevails over and

		above the stings and pains of the senses.
Govinda	Nightmare	'Go' means Veda and 'vid' is to know. Govinda is Knowledge itself. Vedanta says this existence is the illusion of maya. By knowing Govinda this false dream breaks and we wake up to eternal Truth.
Madhusudan	Crisis	Through the ages, again and again, this magic name has helped man overcome demons and asuras of personal and national calamities.
Narasimgha	In the woods and jungles	In the forest if the lion is my god then dare other creatures cause me harm ?
Jalashayi	In fire	Water is the antidote to fire and Vishnu's name cools the scorching blaze.
Baraha	In water	Vishnu as Baraha avatar of the boar had held up drowning Mother Earth with His tusks.

Raghunandan	On the mountains	At Chitrakutha mountain Sri Ram had spelt out assurance to the frightened sages and brahmins from the atrocities of the asuras.
Vamana	Journeys	While proceeding forth, if we take his name then our steps will be energised by extraordinary speed.
Madhava	In all works	All work and activity cannot be enunciated but if we take this name for any form of activity, then His grace will never leave our side. 'Ma' means Lakshmi the goddess of prosperity and 'dhava' is her spouse. The two are inseparable.

The scriptures say that upon rising at dawn if we take these sixteen names of Vishnu then we will find shelter at the sunset hour of our lives. Through all the ups and downs the devotee who constantly remembers Lord Vishnu is never lost—he becomes one with Him. Overcoming all sins of previous actions he finds Liberation.

The Ten Avatars of Viṣṇu

Through the ages, again and again, He that is Infinite has descended down to us in form and shape to save His beloved from the harm of evil and to re-establish the Kingdom of Truth. The previous nine Avatars were Matsya (Fish), Kurma (Tortoise), Baraha (Boar), Nrisimha (Lion-man), Vamana (Dwarf), Parushuram, Dasarathi Rama, Balarama and Buddha. The tenth descent will be Kalki Avatar.

At the time of destruction when the waters rose, the Vedas were about to drown. As the Fish (Meena or Matsya), he saved the Scriptures. As the Tortoise (Kurma) he kept Mother Earth afloat. The Boar (Varaha) Avatar saved Earth by destroying the demon Hirankshya with his tusks. As the fourth Avatar he emerged as Lion-man, Nrisimha, from a pillar and killed Hiranyakashipu who was terrorising the devotees. When Bali banished Indra and the gods from heaven, Vishnu descended as Vamana Avatar. He asked Bali to grant him three steps of land, and with each foot-fall he covered the three worlds and imprisoned Bali in the nether world. Vamana Avatar is also known as Upendra because he was born to Kashyap and Aditi. Next came Parushurama. To avenge his father's death he encircled earth twenty one times destroying Kshatriyas. Sri Rama was the seventh Avatar. Son of King Dasarath, he came to destroy the titan Ravana and bring back peace and prosperity. As Balaram he destroyed evil Kamsa and as Buddha in the ninth incarnation he established the path of non-violence. The tenth Avatar Kalki will terminate the Mlechhas and reign over the Kingdom of Truth. Kalki Purana predicts that he will be born in Sambhal village, of Brahmin parents named Vishnuyasha and Sumati.

The Story of Evolution and Avatarhood

Some scholars are of the opinion that the legend of Vishnu's Avatars tell the story of evolution. This needs careful consideration.

We have seen that in the beginning there was only water. No life was yet visible. This water of Karanbari (came in potential form waiting to be manifested as effect) slowly concentrated into terrestial waters and fish evolved. God as the Fish (Matsya) salvaged the Vedas. This is not the Vedas in the form of books but as the first blooming of principles. Then came the Tortoise (Kurma)—a creature that can live both on land and in water. Land began to peep through the waters. From these depths the tortoise emerged with clay on it's back and clay is but a part of Mother Earth.

Evolution marched on. More and more land appeared and it was but natural that a total land animal would come forth. This land was still soft and marshy, the ideal hunting ground for the Boar (Varaha). Even today boars wallow in the swamps.

Land area began to increase. Forests sprang up and after the boar came the fierce lion who began to lord it over. Perhaps there were also tigers and the like. But the greatest being, man, was still absent. Hinting at this next stage, Sri Hari descended as half-human and half-beast—Narahari. Narahari killed the demon Hiranyakashipu. (Nar refers to man and Hari to the beast. The gorilla and chimpanzee are close to this concept). Renowned Bengali poet Bhubanmohan Das has said that Hiranyakashipu was a worm that infested the marshy watery tracts of yester years. And this Narahari tore apart the banana plants and destroyed these worms. These insects used to destroy the banana fruit which was the first food of primitive man. The banana is still worshipped, and no festival is complete without this plant, most probably because this was the earliest food of man.

With the removal of obstacles for survival, evolution progressed and gradually man began to shed his animal characteristics. This man was a dwarf. In other words manhood had not as yet reached its full maturity and in fact the quadruped had shed only one leg—three legs were still there. There was not enough land surface for the Dwarf to place his three steps. In the next stage evolved man, the human being. Armed with an axe he cleared the forests and initiated agriculture. With the sunset of

the age of animals the dawn of mankind broke through. Legend says that Parushurama destroyed Kartaviryarjuna who had thousand arms, rid the earth of the kshatriyas twenty one times and killed his own mother Renuka. Kartaviryarjuna most probably was a gigantic tree with innumerable branches ; that which comes out of Kshetra or land may be symbolically taken to mean the tree ; Mother Earth had to be tilled and broken up (made into 'renus') to facilitate agriculture. So here is a picture of man the agriculturist clearing the forest with his axe and tilling the soil.

After this comes Rama the consort of Sita holding aloft the bow and arrow. There is a confrontation between Prasuram and Rama. The far flying bow and arrow established its supremacy over the axe and the old gave way to the new. Thus Sri Rama marks the advent of a new era. First Rama had cleared the jungles while the other Rama, son of Dasarath, planted the seeds of civilisation. The principles of the ideal mother, father, wife, friend, brother, king and subject were held aloft. Rama appeared as the defender and preserver. He also improved agricultural methods as can be seen in the story of Ahalya. Ahalya is that stony land which cannot be penetrated by the 'hal' or plough. Indra's raping of Ahalya can be taken to be the showering of incessant rain on barren tracts. Goutam was Ahalya's spouse and 'go' or the cow is indispensible in agriculture. All told, it seems that an organised attention was given to make the barren lands fertile. Ahalya was thus saved by Rama. Rama is also known as Sitapati or husband of Sita. Sita means the tip of the plough.

Then came Samkarshan Rama holding the plough. In the age of agriculture he is the third Rama. The Vedic Aranyak and Pauranic agricultural civilisation flow from the same streams. Mankind finds complete manifestation in this third stage. Man began to till knowledge and as it's fruit descended avatar Narayana as the perfect incarnation of God in man—Sri Krishna. In the history of evolution we now find that the peak has been reached. Glory to man—the jewel of creation.

Krishna is the greatest of all Avatars. He is God Himself. Never has there been such a concentration of principles and moods in one form. Nrisimha and Buddha manifest mainly violence and non-violence respectively. But in Krishna can be seen not only these two qualities but also the ideals of devotion, knowledge, works-sacrifices, valour-grace, renunciation-enjoyment, punishment-forgiveness etc. Only one central idea dominated the Fish and Tortoise Avatars. But Krishna's significance is universal and spread out. Rama too was not so much evolved in the sphere of knowledge. From birth till the end, Krishna was always established in a divine play of changing moods of myriad sparkling colours.

Innumerable Avatars

The ten popular avatars of Vishnu have been listed, but He had come inform of man many more innumerable times. The scriptures say that His manifestation has been sometimes partial and at other times complete. According to the situation He manifested Himself.

In the eighteenth year of Dwapar, Vishnu came down as Dwaipayan Vyas to divide the Vedas and introduce the Puranas. In the sixth part, Purushottam Krishna appeared as the son of Vasudeva. In the tenth yuga of Treta, Duttatraya was another avatar of Vishnu.

Brihaddharma Purana lists the following avatars of Vishnu in sequence : Brahmachari, Varaha, Nara-Narayan, Kapila (exponent of Samkhya philosophy), Duttatreya, Yajna (son of Huti), Hrishabha, Prithu (planner of villages and towns), Safari, Kurma, Dhanwantari (expounder of medicines), Nrisimha, Rama, Vamana, Bhrigurama, Valmiki (author of Ramayana), Krishna Dwaipayan Vyasa (wrote Puranas and Mahabharata), Buddha, Balaram and Krishna (sixth and eighth sons of Devaki).

Vishnu Purana states that the regions of the nether world are parts of Vishnu's tamasic nature. He is present in Bhadrashwa-

Varsha, Ketumal Varsha, Bharat Varsha and Kuru Varsha as Hayahshira, Baraha, Kurma and Matsya respectively. Again Vishnu presides as various gods in different manantwars.

Manwntwar (Epoch)	*God*
Swayambhu	Yajnadeva
Swarochisha	Tushitadeva
Auttam	Sattyadeva
Tamasa	Harideva
Raibata	Manasdeva
Chakhsusha	Baikunthadeva
Baibaswat	Vamana

Padma Purana tells the story of how Vishnu was once incarnated as a tree. Once while on an errand for the gods, Agni god of fire, disturbed the solitude of Shiva and Parbati. Parbati mentally cursed all the gods. As a result, all of them, including Vishnu, became trees. Lord Vishnu became the banyan and one of his thousand name is Briksha. Briksha means immobile. Vishnu is the effulgent, eternal unchanging Purusha, and briksha is the nearest approach to describing him.

Legend goes that Vishnu once took on the form of a seductive woman named Mohini, bewitched the asuras and tricked them out of their share of the nectar. His ultimate motive however was to spare the world from misery and unhappiness. On another occasion He took the incarnation of Hayagriba, penetrated the nether world and retrieved for Brahma the Vedas which had seen forcibly taken away by the demons Madhu and Kaitava.

Many believe that Sri Gaurchandra (1485) of Nadia was an incarnation of Vishnu, born to deliver the men of Kaliyuga. Taking on the role of the devotee of love he spread the name of

Sri Hari from door to door. This was the sole purpose of his descent.

Viṣṇu in the Purāṇas

It is not possible to recount the entire episode in a brief essay. The Vedic rishis in terse brief aphorisms, sang his greatness. But the Puranas waxed eloquent and elaborated on his majesty. Innumerable are the legends surrounding Vishnu in Vishnu, Saura, Bhagavat, Brahmavaivarta, Matsya, Shiva, Brihaddharma and Vayu Puranas, as well as in Hari Vamsa. Any enthusiastic reader can go through these volumes. We have however touched on the main points.

Viṣṇu in Tantra

Vishnu does not belong only to the Vedas and the Puranas but occupies a prominent place in the Tantra also. The swadhistan chakra, as the principle of apa (water), he who is blue in hue and has four arms, is Narayana. His eternal constant companions are Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati.

In Yoga, Vishnu forever presides over the anahata-chakra. To the yogis the vaikuntha of Vishnu is in the space of our hearts. With the blessings of the proper Guru, when the kundalini shakti of the worthy initiated disciple rises to meet the divinity of man residing in the heart, then the awakened tide of this divinity begins to drown in unspeakable bliss. This circle is completed only after full realisation of it's knowledge. The yogic point of sattva at this place is Vishnugranthi.

Garuda the Vāhana of Viṣṇu

We are not actually acquainted with a bird of this description but mankind has a lot to learn from this mythological winged creature.

Most probably the Puranas took up the twin references to Suparna and Garuatman in the Vedas to conjure the image of Garuda and made him to be Vishnu's carriage. Shyena or Taksha or Suparna was the mythical bird who went to bring Soma from the heavens. A war had broken out and one of its feathers had fallen off. Taksha struck terror in the hearts of his enemies but himself remained unconquerable. This same Garuda, to free his mother Vinata from bondage, brought nectar from heaven. At that time he had waged a fierce battle against Indra and the gods. They were defeated by Garuda. As a last recourse Indra hurled his mighty weapon Bajra, but Garuda only laughed at that. Nevertheless in order to give Bajra its due respect, Garuda shed one of his feathers.

Valour and devotion have come together in the character of Garuda. He is unparalleled in love for his mother and in indifference towards mundane materialism. The nectar was within his grasp but for his own self Garuda was not the least interested even in a single drop. These characteristics attracted Vishnu to Garuda. Vishnu suggested to him to ask of him a boon. Garuda said : "Without tasting of nectar let me remain immortal ; secondly, allow me to be your carriage and vahana." Vishnu agreed to the wishes of his devotee. Now it was Garuda's turn to grant Vishnu a boon. Vishnu said : "Be my vahana." Garuda readily consented. On the pretext of granting boons God placed the devotee above himself, flying him as the flag atop his chariot. And the devotee remained forever at his feet. Even today this duet of the Divine and the Devotee is music to our souls. We pray to Garuda : "Oh king of the devotees Garuda— show us the way so that we too may remain bowed at Lord Vishnu's feet with our palms enjoined."

"Yathā tvaṁ saṁpuṭakaraḥ satataṁ nataskandharaḥ ।
Tathaiva purato viṣṇo stvatprasādād bhavāmyaham ॥"

Chapter VII

AGNI

Piṅgabhrūs'mas'rukes'ākṣaḥ Pīnaṅgajaṭharo' ruṇaḥ|
Chāgasthaḥ sakṣasūtro' gniḥ sapārccih S'aktidhārakaḥ
om Agnaye Namaḥ (Ādiīya Purāṇ)

The Popular Hymn of Agni

He whose eyebrows, beard, hair and eyes are copper coloured ; whose body and matted locks are red ; who is seated on a goat ; who holds the rosary and the sacred thread ; who has seven locks and upholds shakti – salutations to that god Agni.

Agni in the Rigveda

Agni is one of the greatest amongst Vedic gods. The Vedas abound with salutations to Agni and the Rig Veda alone has 200 shuktas about him. The Rig Veda starts and ends with prayers to Agni. From the Rigveda we get a soul stirring account of Agni's form, power, placement, movement, subtle and gross functions and sacrificial works etc.

Agni is young and powerful. He has come out of friction and rubbing and so is named Pramantha. He is fed on clarified butter and the colours of blue green and yellow dance in him. He has burning tresses and flashes sharp teeth. His tongue is his face and this face is universal. Sweet and scorching are his tongues which are seven or at times three in number. Agni carries the offerings and is the mouth of the gods. He is the priest and mediates between man and god.

His eyes are clarified butter. Agni on the ground is as powerful as the bull, and in the air he is like the falcon. In water he is like the swan and spreading wings Agni jumps from tree to tree and reigns over the entire forest. Young Agni is like a calf while

the mature Agni is powerful and fierce like the horse which carries the gods.

Agni eats everything. Clarified butter is his drink. He partakes of food thrice a day. For the sacrifices Agni lights up at dawn ; with his effulgence Agni destroys darkness ; Agni's fast moving chariot is pulled by golden horses.

Agni protects the sacred plant Soma. He is the float on water. He is the twice born brahmin, the householder and the dear friend of mankind. He is the messenger of the gods. He is the talented, learned seer who knows everything. He is the truthful scholar engaged in myriad endeavours and is the protector of the yajna. He fans the flames of the sacrifices and grants boons of wealth, prosperity, many subjects and food. He is the all knower who devours everything ; fleeting like the wind he burns the dead ; he is the navel of Mother Earth.

Agni destroys enemies and diseases. He is the king of the masses. He rests on a dias and gets divided in the forest. Mother Earth holds him on her lap. The heavens nourish him like a child. He lives in both young and old trees. He is the king of sacrifices. He is the son of Ball. He is the son of Angira. He is the son of Davya-Prithivi. Dawn is his parent. The ten fingers of those who lights the fire are Agni's ten nursemaids.

The Significance of the Different Names of Agni

The discovery of fire was a watershed in the history of mankind. Fire is inseparable from our day-to-day existence and progress. The other gods are not perceptible but Agni can be seen. He lives with us, shares our lives and is very near and dear to man. No wonder the Vedic seers waxed eloquent in Agni's praise.

Fire is illumined matter and takes on various hues like blue, green, golden or red. The seers, in matchless metre and rhyme, have described these tongues of flame. Fire is light and so is called Ghritaprishtna or Pradiptavayab. Ghrita means illumina-

tion. That which easily lights up when cast into the fire is ghrita and is used as 'haban' in sacrifices. The blue Fire is also known as Neelaprishta. Its leaping golden flames are compared to locks of hair and to flashing green teeth. Thus fire is called Hiranyakesha, Jwalakesha, Tikshadamstra, Hiranyadamstra etc. The golden flames are referred to as Pingalasashru.

Juhu is the ladle used for pouring clarified butter in the sacrificial fire. It looks like a tongue and is said to be that of Agni's – his jihava. The flames spread everywhere and so fire is Viswatamukha. Sweet are the tongues of fire which taste nectar, butter, milk, animal flesh and other nourishing items.

The seven predominant flames of Agni are Kali, Manojaba, Dhuma, Karali, Lohita, Sfulingini and Viswaruchi. Agni is often called Saptajihava, Trijihava, Trimurdha, Tritanu. The three aspects of Agni are the householder's fire and the fires that are advancing and retreating.

Agni takes the offerings to the gods and through Agni the gods partake of them. Thus he is the middle-man between man and god. Without fire no ceremony can be initiated and so fire is the Purohita ('Puro' means the forerunner and 'hita' is the respected one) – the priest.

The ghrita are the eyes of Agni. The flames leap up as soon as clarified butter is poured. It is as if the eyes of the fire god come alive. Ghrita energises fire and like knowledge it enlarges our vision. Fire illumines everything and so Agni is eulogised as the knower and omniscient seer. It is not only to the external world that reference is being made. The seat of man's intellect is a fine subtle point that electrifies his being. This is the essence of all knowledge and the source of its myriad manifestations. This inner glow is tattva darshan or realisation of the Self in the self.

Agni of the Vedas is incomplete in form. Popularly he is known to be corpulent with a red belly ; he has a beard, teeth, locks of hair and a tongue, but is without feet or head. It is indeed a strange and bewildering description that is difficult to conjure. Agni has everything and yet is nothing. He is with and

without form. As a manifestation he has hue, tresses, glow, grace, activity and valour that are perceptible. But as a subtle principle, fire is a micro atomic energy latent in all creation. In his universality Agni is Brahma ; in energy he is Shakti ; in illumination he is the Pranab ; he is the priest of the sacrifice. Who is able to describe Agni ?

In the process of evolution a special state of fire is water and thus it is in a way the seed or cause of water. The fire engulfed substance first becomes black and then it lights up. As the copious fire advances its black path of progress is well marked out. That which fire discards becomes sooty and then turns to dark ashes. In reality the light of knowledge is preceded by darkness of ignorance.

The Agni of the householder is the witness for all ceremonies like the wearing of the holy thread, weddings, planting of trees, digging of ponds etc. Fire is to the householder, his friend, guide and philosopher. Agni is the manifestation of truth, and the symbol of prosperity for king and subject alike.

Agni blesses us with fiery subjects or progeny. These are the fruits of sacrifices and observance of celibacy. The creative essence of man is an energised fluid which if embedded in fertile soil will bloom into worthy offsprings. Amongst the celibate this substance is converted to become Ojas which has rare potential powers.

The sacrifices lead to ample rainfall and this blesses the land with rich harvests. Thus Agni blesses man with food. The heat of the earth and the sun evaporate the waters to form clouds ; winds drift them upwards until they become heavy and moist, to condense back to earth as rain. There is nothing that Agni does not swallow and so he is Sarvabhuk. Goats, sheep, grains etc. are all offered to fire and from the time of the Vedic Age the dead are given up to the flames. That is why Agni is Mritahari or devourer of the dead. Agni by his fire destroys all sins but he himself is Pabaka because 'pap' or sin cannot scald him. Weapons of fire destroy enemies. The body functions properly and is free from ailments only while there is heat in it. Warmth

from the sun nourishes and sustains us. Thus fire spells life to man both internally and externally ; physically as well as spiritually.

Agni is said to be the navel of the earth. This central point generates energy. The fire in the yajna is a mini version of this. The fires nourish and preserve and they are our twin mothers. None dares to cross the fires that encircle the yajna. The Vedic seers prayed to Agni to be as approachable to us as we are to our fathers.

The basis of Aryan culture is the sacrifical fire. In those days there was a fire burning in the homes of all householders, at hermitages, in humble hearths and king's palaces. India's heritage and philosophy centres and revolves around the holy Agni.

Agni in the Purāṇas

After Indra, the second position goes to Agni in the Rigvedas. No other god has been thus favoured. But in the Puranas, Agni is not so diverse as Vishnu. What we find in the Puranas and Mahabharata are repititions of Vedic salutations.

In the Mahabharata there is the narration of the burning of Khandava forest. Once King Swetaki organised a yajna for one hundred years and this made Agni unwell. Unable to find a cure, Agni disguised himself as a brahmin, came to Krishna and Arjuna, and asked of the permission to burn Khandava forest. Only after devouring the countless animals, birds and reptiles did Agni recover. In this wood there lived a bird name Jarita, who was the wife of the sage Mandapal. Their four fledgelings had sung hymns adulating Agni and the latter spared them. We find this same Jarita in the Mahabharata. In the 149the shukta's 1st mantra of 10th mandal, Jarita is a seer praying to Agni. In the Mahabharata, Agni as a brahmin married the beautiful daughter of Neela, the king of Mahismati, and saved the kingdom from fire. In these instances Agni is personified as a human.

Brahmavaivarta Purana says Agni came into being from the seed of Brahma's overflowing creative fluid. Swaha and Agni

gave birth to three sons named Dakshina, Garhapatta and Ahavaniya. This Purana recounts the anecdotes of Agni entering the kitchen of the seven sages (Saptarshi) and touching their women. For this misdemeanour Angira rishi cursed Agni to be the one who devours everything without discrimination.

In Lingapurana, during the battle of Dakshayajna, Agni is killed by Virabhadra. Later Mahadeva rejuvenates him. Harivamsa says that once a thirsty Agni begged and got from Kartavirarjuna seven islands. But later Agni quenched his thirst by engulfing the same Kartavirarjuna's city and villages. This story hints at the self destructive fate of the arrogant monarch. Bhagwat claims Agni to be the child of Dharma and Daksha's daughter Vasu. He is the premier of the eight Vasus. Varahapurana tells another tale. Brahma was immersed in deep thought. He wanted to create, but just could not go about it. This angered Brahma and out of his rage came forth Agni. Immediately upon appearing, Agni rushed to burn Brahma himself. But Brahma told him to devour Habya and Kabya. Since then Agni's name is Habyavahana. A second opinion is that immediately following birth, Agni went to Brahma to learn about his duties. Brahma advised him to be content as Trividharupa (Dakshinagni, Garhapatyagni, Ahavania Agni). Ramayana says that Neela is the son of Agni. Vamanadi Purana takes Kartikeya, the commander of the gods to be Agni's son. Drinking the potent creative fluid of Mahadeva, Agni's flesh, blood, muscles, marrow and all his hair became golden. His name came to be Hiranyareta. Unable to keep and hold this energy of Rudra, Agni discarded it. Kutila daughter of Himalaya, received it and gave birth to a son amongst the bull-rushes. This child was Kartikeya with the six faces. Many are the legends woven around Agni in various Puranas.

Agni and the Brahmin

Agni is closely connected with the Ritwik Brahmin and the yajna. In the Rigveda, Agni is given priority over all other gods.

Without Agni no sacrifice can be performed. In the Puranas Agni often comes down in the form of a brahmin. The brahmin has been compared to Agni in austerities, self-control, charity, observances, cleanliness, kindness, aversion towards sin, knowlege, discrimination and faith.

Who are the brahmins ? From Brahma's mouth came forth Yajna, Agni, Gayatri, metre, Sama Veda, the brahmin and the goat. Because they came from Brahma's mouth or ''mukha'' they are mukhya and belong to the same group. They are all indispensible for the purpose of yajna as the priest, hota, object of sacrifice and the hymn. Agni is the first amongst gods as Mukhopadhya amongst brahmins and the goat amongst animals. (Taitariya Samhita 2/6/3)

Agni and the Goat

The goat and Agni are closely connected in sacrificial works and this animal is taken to be the fire god's vahana. Agni carries the flesh of the goat to the gods ; the goat gives its life to take the sacrificial works to its successful conclusion. In both, the principle of carrying something is present.

Let us look at it from the point of view of science. The goat devours all kinds of vegetation with ease. His fiery digestive powers make this possible. In ancient days T.B. patients were advised to stay in close proximity with a foul smelling particular type of goat. It is a popular belief that the goat is never attacked with tuberculosis. Perhaps there is a predominance of oxygen in this animal. And oxygen is a prime companion of fire.

The Horse as Agni's Vāhana

In the Rigveda the golden horse carries Agni. This animal of substance and strength has been rightly chosen to play a vital part in Yajna. In this Rigveda Pusha's Vahana is the ram.

CHAPTER VIII

SŪRYA

Om raktāmbujāsanamaśeṣaguṇaikasindhuṁ
Bhānuṁ samastajagatāmadhipaṁ bhajāmi |
Padmadvayābhayavarān dadhataṁ
karāvjairmāṇikyamoulimaruṇāṅgarucim trinetram ||

Popular Salutations

Salutations to Bhanu, seated on the scarlet lotus, crowned by the bejewelled tiara, in whom all qualities are concentrated. The Lord of the Universe, he has three eyes ; his complexion is red and he holds aloft two flowers. He assures and blesses us.

Raktāvjayugmābhayadānahastaṁ
keyurāṅgadakuṇḍlādhyam |
Māṇikyamoulim dinanāthamīḍe
vandhukakāntim vilasatrinetram ||

Hymn

We bow to Surya whose colour is red as the Bandhuk flower, and who is the god of daylight. He holds in his hands two red flowers and with the others he grants and gives us assurance. He is adorned with armlets, bangles, ear-rings and a priceless bejewelled crown.

Prayers to Sūrya

Jabakusumasaṅkāśaṁ kāśyapeyaṁ mahādyutiṁ |
Dhāntārim sarvapāpaghnaṁ praṇato'smi divākaram ||

We bow to the red complexioned Divakar, son of Kashyap, gifted with talents, enemy of darkness and destroyer of evil.

Sūrya in Rigveda

Surya and Sabita are the same. Sayanacharya commented that the hour just before the sun rises is Savita.

''Udayāt purvabhāvī sabitā ।
Udayāstamayamadhyavartī sūryaḥ ।''

Surya reigns supreme from dawn to sunset. The other names of Surya in the Vedas are Aditya, Vishnu, Vivaswan, Mitra, Pusha etc.

There are ten and eleven shuktas of Surya and Savita respectively in the Rigveda. That apart there are scattered other shuktas addressed to Savita and to other gods as well.

Surya is the son of Duloka and Aditi. Usha is his spouse. At times Janatri is his wife. Surya came into being from the eyes of the Virat Purusha.

''Cakṣoḥ sūryo'jāyata'' ।
''Cakṣurmitrasya varuṇasyāgneḥ'' —

Agni is the face of the gods and Surya constitutes the pair of eyes.

''Taccakṣurdevahitaṁ purastācchukramuccarat''
''Uḍveti subhago viśvacakṣā'' etc.

Surya is the god of philosophy or darshan. Without light, vision is not possible.

The large eyed Surya is the jewel of the sky.

''Divo rukma urucakṣā udeti'' ।

He roams the sky like a horse, bird or bull. He initiates man to work because as soon as the sun rises man begins to stir and move. Like the lifting of the eyelids, the sun lifts the veil of darkness.

''Carmevāvādhustamo apasvantaḥ ।''

Seeing the sun, darkness and the stars hastily retreat like thieves.

"Apatye tāyavo yathā nakṣatra |
Yantyaktubhiḥ sūrāya viśvacakṣase |"

Surya increases longevity and destroys evil spirits, sin, poverty and nightmares. Surya gives heat and nourishment. His hair is golden as we can all see.

Surya is omniscient because he illumines creation and is the witness of everything whether good or evil. It is Sabita (Surya) who takes us to the heavens to enjoy the fruits of our good deeds.

Surya's daughter is Suriyā and he wanted to give her in marriage to Soma. But there were many suitors for her hand. Surya then arranged a race and the winners were the twin brothers Aswinis. So we see that in those days the custom was to lay a wager ('pan'), in which the suitor would have to prove his mettle. But today whether the groom has any capability or not, the bride's father is fleeced mercilessly !

In the Rig Veda (10th mandal's 85th shutra) a detailed description of the wedding is given. Even today some of these mantras are used in Hindu weddings. The ideals held aloft are eternal and priceless. "Oh bride – reside in your husband's home and bring peace with prosperity. Take good care of the servants and domestic animals. May you be free from ill temper ; may you be your husband's well-wisher ; may you be the well-wisher of the animals ; may you be pleasant and gracious ; may you be the mother of the brave and valiant ; may you have faith and devotion in God ; may you win over your father-in-law, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law and thus reign supreme. "The couple together prayed :" May Prajapati bless us with children ; may Aryama keep us united till old age ; may the Viswa devas unite our hearts ; may Jalagon, Matariswa, Dhata and Bagdevi keep us conjoined."

Hindu marriage is the union of heart with heart and soul with soul therefore, cannot be broken at ease.

Surya, in the mantra as well as in the Vedas, is saluted to be the one who delivers us from evil. Surya increases our longevity and cures illness. Its rays purify the atmosphere, destroys germs and multiplies harvests.

Today the astronomers say that the sun is a burning disc of molten metals. Surrounding it are three humid layers, which again are circumscribed by a corona. Sometimes a convulsion causes the sun to scatter balls of burning lava. This is like the bejewelled crown of the sun. The mantra on Surya also refers to various adornments like bracelets, wristlets, armlets and the crowning tiara.

Thus we find a parallel between Vedic and modern scientific line of thought. But the Vedic seers saw in Surya the soul of the Universe, whereas to modern astronomers the sun is but unconscious matter.

''Sūrya ātmā jagataḥ tasthuṣaśca''

*— Haṁsavatī Ṛig** 4/40/5.

The Hamsavatī Rig (Rig 4/40/5) sings : ''He is the swan of the sky ; the Vasu of the hidden world ; the Hota in the altar ; the guest in the home. He resides amongst men ; in sanctified places; at the yajna site and in imperceptible zones. He is born in water ; in the rays ; in truth and on the mountain. He is Truth. ''The commentator Sayanacharya explains that in this Rig salutations are given to three entities — (1) the golden Purusha who is the deity of the illumined circle ; (2) the Paramatma who resides in the hearts of all and (3) the Parabrahman who is without name, form or attributes.

In Rigvedic mantra (10/170/4) Savita is the procreator and preserver. Modern science too admits that the earth came into existence from the sun. The moon and the other planets are anchored to the field of the sun. It is the pull of the sun that saves the earth from spinning out of its orbit. The moon is a satellite of the earth. Thus science today seems to repeat the Rig Veda.

In the 10th mandal (37th shukta's 9th Rig),

"Yasya te viśvā bhuvanāni ketunā,
Pracerate ni ca viśvante aktubhiḥ |"

the sun is said to be the determiner of day and night. In another Rig we come to know of the 360 days of a year. The Surya circle has 12 aras (months) ; 360 days and nights add to 720 placements in the sky. The Aryan seers had minutely calculated the revolutions round the sun.

In another Rig (Rigveda 9/86/32) it is said that the moon has no light of its own but it only reflects the sun. Another Rig (1/84/15) says the same thing. The Rig Veda (5/40/5) hints at the solar eclipse. The raksha, Swarbhanu, covered the sun in darkness. Atri saved and returned it to light. The Vedic Swarbhanu probably took the name of Rahu in the Puranas. Here we find that a scientific truth has been coloured with a legend.

Modern science has come to the startling discovery that all energy are different forms of solar power. The earth itself is a piece of the sun. Our Vedic seers had long ago realised this special power of the sun. Daily they meditated on the wealth (bhag) of Surya or Savita, and looked to the Surya to illumine man's inner being from light to more light. Gayatri mantra composed by rishi Viswamitra in the Gayatri metre is very famous. Brahmins are to chant it three times a day. It contains the seed of total Vedic knowledge. Surya is the source not only of terrestial light but also of transcendental illumination.

The sun's control over the six seasons can be found in Rig Veda (1/164/12 and 2/36/1). Another Shukta (1/95/3) too hints at this. Mention has also been made of the Northern and southern solstices.

The Rig Veda prays to Surya for food. There is a story in the Mahabharata of Draupadi being gifted by Surya with a sack containing eternal food. Today we are well aware how much dependent mankind is on the sun for the harvest.

Science analyses the role of the sun in controlling the flow of wind and water. The moon causes high and low tides but ultimately the source of moon's power is the sun. In the Rig Vedic sutras (6/71/2 & 1/23/17 "Devasya vayaṁ savituḥ" Ṛg veda (6/71/2), "Amūryā apa sūrya yābhirvā sūryaḥ saha") these same ideas are put forward. In other shukta (1/22/6) Surya is said to be son of Water. Tenth mandala's shukta (10/72/7) says that the devas brought out Surya from the waters.

Savita has been ceaselessly working from the dawn of creation. Sometimes dense clouds cover the sun. The Vedic rishis described this as Indra stealing the wheels of Surya's chariot. The eyes of the dead are believed to merge in the sun.

"Suryaṁ cakṣurgacchatu ।"

In the Vedas, Surya's vahana is the horse. Seven golden horses pull Surya's one-wheeled chariot as he encircles the earth. The vahana of Savita too is the horse. On a golden chariot the scarlet horse with white hooves carries Savita. Savita's complexion is golden ; his arms are golden and his tongue is golden. Savita treads the path of Usha, the dawn.

Ṣapta tvā harito rathe vahanti deva sūrya ।
Śociṣkeśaṁ vicakṣaṇa ॥ —*Ṛg* – 1/50/8

There are many such touching references to Surya and Savita in the Rigveda.

Sūrya in the Purāṇas

Surya is the source of our vital force. Like the Vedic seers the Pauranic composers too had realised this truth. Vayu Purana acknowledges Surya to be the cause for the manifestation and destruction of all bhutas. The Markendiya and Shiva Puranas say that different parts of Surya formed the earth, heaven and nether worlds.

According to Saura Purana, Surya is the son of Kashyap. His sons are Vaivaswat Manu, Sarvani, Yama, Shoni and Rebanti.

Yamuna is his daughter. The wives of Surya are Samgya, Chhaya, Ragyi, Prabha etc.

Vishnu Purana calculates the circumference of Surya's chariot. The names of his seven horses are Gayatri, Brihati, Ushnik, Jagati, Tristup, Anustup and Pangti. Other puranas also testify to seven horses. But Vishnu Purana has named them matching the seven metres of Vedic rhymes.

Mahabharata is rich with legends about Surya. Here are a few. When the asura Rahu came disguised to the court of the devas in order to steal Amrita, Surya and Chandra exposed him. A war broke out between them but the other gods did not help Surya. A furious Surya decided to withdraw his powers and destroy the Universe. But Kashyap's son Arun, on the request of Brahma, came forward in front of Surya and took away that illuminating force. In another instance, Vindhya mountain raised his head to block the path of Surya. Agastya muni tricked Vindhiya to wait for him by keeping his head down. Agastya never returned.

Renuka was the wife of sage Jamadagni. She was collecting the arrows with which he was practising. The scorching sun made her uncomfortably hot. She began to sweat. Immediately Jamadagni resolved to curse Surya for being the cause of her discomfiture. Afraid of the consequences Surya came forward with a umbrella and a pair of wooden slippers for Renuka. From thence on the usage of these two items became prevalent.

Martandya is another name of Surya. Vayu Purana narrates that in the beginning Surya was born as a glowing egg. Seeing that even after a long time that egg did not hatch, Twasta broke it apart. This caused pain to the father Kashyap. He cried out : "This egg has not died :" Since then Surya's name is Martanday. This Purana also says that our calculations of time – its months, seasons etc. are all based on Surya. Surya is the premier amongst the nine planets. The names of the other eight are Soma, Mangal, Budha, Brihaspati, Shukra, Shoni, Rahu and Ketu. In all holy performances these nine are worshipped (Brihaddharma Purana). Devi Purana, Kurma Purana etc. give

the measurement of Surya's circumference (9000 yojanas) and area (27,000 yoganas). The Devi Purana establishes Surya to be the god who cures leprosy.

In the Ramayana it is said that arrogant Ravana on his conquering spree went upto the Suryaloka. There he saw seated the bejewelled Surya deva, attired in gold, adorned with red sandalwood paste, garlanded with red flowers. The ten faced Ravana sent his ambassador Prahasta to warn Surya of his intentions. Surya called his main minister Dandi and said : "Go. Either defeat Ravana in combat or admit defeat." Dandi did what he was asked. The King of Lanka proudly announced his victory and departed. Later when the battle for Lanka was coming to an end, the proud intoxicated Ravana was given his just desserts. He met his end with Brahma's spears made from powers of Surya.

Salutations to Sūrya in the Rāmayana

In the Ramayana chapters on war (Yuddhakanda), Rama chants hymns (Aditya – Hridaya stotras) to Surya. It was taught to Him by the seer Vasishta. Aimed at destroying the opponent, these mantras rejuvenated a war-weary Rama with new strength and enthusiasm. Geared up anew, Rama took up the weapon of Brahma (Brahmastra), chanted mantras over it, and hurled it. It was Ravana's death sentence. This hymn says Surya's rays are strongly powerful ; with his rays Surya illumines everything and sustains gods as well as titans ; He is Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Skanda, Prajapati, Kuber, Samudra, Indra, Lord of Death Yama etc. ; he is the Swadhyas, Vasus, Praja and Prana ; many are his names – Aditya, Savita, Khag, Amsuman, Gabhasthiman, Pusha, Divakar, Hiranyareta, Saptaswa, Sahasrarasmi, Haridaswa, Ravi, Martandya, Marichman, Agnigarbha, Kavi, Atapi, Timiraha, Byomkesha, Viswakarma, Tamoghna, Pingala etc. ; he is Sisirashan, Aditinandan, Vedatrayapratipadya, Samkhya, Sambhu the Destroyer, propounder of water, the speedy traveller in his zone ; he is energy ; he is thinker of the Universe ; he is

the Lord of the householder and extremely powerful ; he is the Omkar ; he is the fierce and the strong ; he is the eye of the Universe ; he illumines knowledge as well as ignorance ; he eats everything ; he is destruction incarnate ; he finishes off enemies; he is the illumined witness ; he is eternal ; his rays shower rain; He is omniscient ; he is the sacrifice as well as the Lord of the sacrifice and its fruits ; he is the giver of boons ; he sets into motion the wheel of works.

It is needless to say that this hymn of the Ramayana reminds us again and again of the Vedic and Pauranic salutations. This deity that rises is clearly perceptible to us, has always been so, and will remain the object of our deepest devotion.

The Worship of Sūrya in Tantra

Like the Vedas and Puranas, in Tantra too Surya's position is unchallenged. In Tantra's ritual of initiation (Panchayani diksha) it is customary to worship Surya. The ten pointed Manichakra has a red triangle in the centre. Surya is to be meditated here with his vahana the Ram.

Maṇipuragata paśyannantaṁ raktamaṇṇdalam ।
Prāṇasaṁrudhya tatraiva cintayedbhāskaraṁ vibhum ॥
Dhāraṇāt pañcaghatikā rūpamātrā susidhyati ।
Nānābhoga-samāyukto vahniṅā saunadahyate ॥

According to Yoga the 5 pranas are to be focused on the Manipurchakra at the navel. Here the illumined red circle symbolising the principle of energy, is to be meditated upon. In this way the yogin can enjoy various pleasures without being scalded and scorched. The ten vrittis of the chitta at the point of Manipurchakra are modesty, stage of the subconscious, hardness, fascination, fear, cowardliness, jealousy and desire. When these are burnt by fire then and then only can the Brahmagranthi be penetrated.

The Horse as Sūrya's Vāhana

In the Vedas and Puranas there is no difference of opinion horse is Surya's vahana who carries him. Not only that – at

times the Vedic rishis have said that Surya is the horse and the horse is Surya : (Rig Veda 1/115/6). On the other hand the Puranas have made out Surya's wife Samjna to be a mare. Surya's son Revanta was born on the back of a horse. Even today, on the occasion of Kojagari Lakshmi Puja offerings are made to Rebanta, son of Surya. Why is the horse Surya's vehicle and carrier ?

Let us look at it from the angles of valour, grace, speed and lineage. In Rigveda's Aswasthuti (1/163) the horse is said to be a part of Surya and repeatedly praised for his heroic qualities, speed and grace.

The planet sun is a concentrated illumined ball of fiery energy. The horse too is a strong beast. A well maintained horse spills out power and energy from each of its pores. The animal seems to simply bubble with life. In the Rigveda the horses of Surya are a golden green and green is the colour of youth.

Both the sun and the horse have been eulogised for their unparalleled grace and beauty. Both are renowned for their speed. Within just eight minutes the rays of the sun crosses a distance of 9 crores 30 lakhs of miles to reach the earth. Amongst animals the horse is well known for its swiftness. Surya's chariot has only one wheel and that is pulled by seven horses.

The horses of Surya are not only green but they are sometimes described as white and scarlet. Actually the seven colours of light are referred to as the seven horses of Surya.

The planets are grouped according to their speed and given a caste name. Surya and Mangal are kshatriyas. Turning to the animal world if the ram is the brahmin then taking into account courage and strength, the horse should belong to the kshatriya caste. Thus the god and his vahana belong to the same caste of kings and warriors.

CHAPTER IX

INDRA

The Popular Hymn of Indra

Pītavarṇaṁ sahasrākṣaṁ vajrapadmakaraṁ vibhum |
Sarvālaṅkārasaṁyuktaṁ naumīndraṁ dikpatīśvaram ||

Salutations to Indra, the one whose hue is golden, who has a thousand eyes, who holds the Vajra weapon and the Lotus flower. He is the bejewelled Lord of all the Directions.

Indra in the Rig Veda

"Vāyurvā Indro vā antarikṣasthānaḥ"
— Ṛgveda

Vayu or Indra resides in the world that is beyond man's ordinary perceptions. In the Rigveda there are 250 shuktas dedicated to Indra alone. In another 50 shuktas or so, Varuna and few other gods are included with Indra. Indra strides over nearly a quarter of the Rigveda.

Who is Indra and what are his functions ? He who showers rain is Indra. He who generates the fire of lightning inbetween two clouds is Indra. In other words, Indra is the god of thunder, lightning and rainfall. Bharatvarsha is an agricultural country and it is on agriculture that depends the wealth and prosperity of her people. The farmers depend on rainfall and this Indra is their prime nourisher and sustainer. In one salulation it is said that the farmers pin their hopes on Indra and take up their sickle. It is Indra who fills their granaries. In another (Ṛgveda 10/133/7) Indra sires the earth who is compared to the cow with thousand flowing rivers of milk.

Indra holds the Bajra or lightning. This was made by Twasta. Another weapon is the Ankush which is used to drive elephants.

"Dīrghaste asvaṅkuśaḥ" (*Ṛgveda* 8/17/10)

Thus the elephant seems to be Indra's vahana oriding animal in the Puranas. However in the Vedas it is the horse which is Indra's vahana. A thousand green horses pull Indra's chariot.

Indra is famous for slaying the demon Vritta. According to Niruktakars this Vritta is the cloud.

"Tat ko vṛtraḥ ?" / "Megha iti nairuktā".

The friction of moisture and lightning that leads to rainfall has been made into the legend of a fight between Indra and Vritta. The Rigveda says that Vritta had imprisoned waterfalls in the mountains. Actually these are clouds atop mountain peaks. Indra released the waters after destroying the demon. Then the waters cascaded down, like calves rushing to nursing cows. Thus Indra replenishes the earth by removing all obstacles to rainfall.

Indra's body, hair, beard and arms are all of a golden hue. Even his chariot, horses and the weapon Vajra are yellow. The Rig Veda salutes both Indra and Savita to be gold and illumined.

Indra has a thousand eyes. Scholars say that the innumerable stars are conjured to be his eyes.

The birth of Indra is described in two complete shuktas of Rig Veda (3/48 and 4/18) but it is different from that of mortals. Inside his mother's womb he himself pushed his way out and immediately illumined the sky. Indra's parents are Twasta and Aditi. He is also known to be the son of Dyaba Prithvi. There is another opinion that he emerged from the mouth of the Virat Purusha. Agni and Pusha are his brothers.

Indra, King of Soma*, drinks its juice liberally. In his mother's breasts he tasted Soma. Indra's belly is a lake of Soma. Each sip of his, sucks dry 30 lakes of Soma (6/66/4). 'As water gushes to the sea, as birds fly to tree tops, Soma rushes towards Indra. Another name for Somakalash (pitcher of Soma) is Indrodar (belly of Indra). Perhaps since Indra is the god of rainfall he was offered more juice of Soma than any other god. In this sense it is said that nobody drank as much Soma as Indra did.

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* Soma = Nectar in heaven

Soma can be interpreted to mean nectar of water. The bird Tarkhya had brought nectar from the heavens for Indra. Indra had unveiled the covering of clouds and showered earth with the nectar of rainfall.

In many instances, together with Indra, Varuna, Agni, Pusha and Vishnu are saluted. Agni and Surya give warmth. Pusha is the nourishing power of Surya. Fire and the rays of the sun convert the waters of the earth to clouds. Vayu or Indra attract and pull this moisture upwards. This leads to the formation of clouds and rainfall. And rain blesses plants and harvests on which depends man's very existence. In this way the cycle of life revolves and the four gods work hand in hand. In the beginning we have seen that the gods are primarily One but manifested as many. These are the words of Rigveda (1/148/36) and also of Brihadarnyak Upanisad.

"Ekaṁ sadviprā vahudhā vadanti |
Agniṁ yamaṁ mātariśvānamāhuḥ ||" (1/148/36)

"Eṣa u hyeva sarve devāḥ"

—Vṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

Indra brings rainfall and therefore prosperity. He is immensely powerful ; he is the spouse of Sachi ; he is the Lord of the Yajna. In the Puranas, Sachi is Indra's wife, but in the Vedas his queen is Indrani or Mena. According to Aiteriya Brahmana, Prahasi is Indra's consort. The Vedas have referred to Indra as Gopati. Here 'go' means rays. The clouds cover the rays of the sun and this is removed only by Indra or Vayu. In this way, because he protects the rays, Indra is known as Gopati. 'Go' can also be taken to mean the earth. By bringing rainfall Indra husbands the earth.

The King of the gods, Indra, (3/46/3) is the Emperor and Lord of the universe (5/30/5). Since birth he is an unvanquished warrior and a terror to his enemies. Victory is not possible without Indra. People seek his shelter at times of warfare (2/12/9). He is the great commander of the army.

"Nṛmṇasya mahā sa janāsa Indraḥ"

—*Ṛgveda*

In a rig (6/46/6) it is said that Indra is the most powerful among the gods ; he defeats his enemies ; he is the illumined one; he has been summoned to get rid of the titans ; he easily defeats enemies and grants protection. In 6th mandala 46 shukta's various other Rigs, Indra's help is sought against those who steal cows ; those who oppress and plunder. It is also prayed : "Oh Indra ! Be in our favour in this battle ; protect our leader from sharp arrows". It is thus clear that bow and arrows were in use in that Vedic age. Further it is said : "With bows we shall win cows, win wars, defeat our enemies and destroy their plans. With the bow we shall conquer all the directions."

Dhanvanā gā dhanvanājiṁ jayema dhanvanā
tīvrāḥ samado jayema |
Dhanuḥ śatrorapakāmaṁ kṛṇoti dhanvanā
sarvāḥ pradiśo jayema ||
(*Ṛgveda* 6/75/2)

Indra is handsome, valorous, powerful and manly. Actually Indra is the god of strength and warfare. He fights to protect the cowherds. The asuras named Pani had stolen the cows from heaven and hidden them in the dark nether world. Taking the help of a female dog Sarama and of the Maruts, Indra brought back the herds. In another instance the Rigveda recounts the legend of Indra saving the cows from the clutches of the evil Ball. If the meaning of 'go' means rays, then every minute it changes its guise. The rays of the Sun are covered by darkness. Sarama or Usha brings news of the hidden light and the dark corners soon gets illumined.

The Rigveda has described various anecdotes depicting the valour of Indra. Dark skinned attackers were repulsed by him ; he searched for 40 years for Sambar in the mountains and slayed him ; Rohini, about to mount the skies was killed by Indra ; he came to be known as Purandar for destroying the towns (pur) of enemies.

Indra's meal consisted of 20 bulls, 300 buffaloes, milk with honey etc. and also many types of drinks, including the juice of Soma of course. From this menu we can surmise the strength and power of Indra. There were also the offerings made to Indra in the yajnas.

Indra is said to be indestructable and immortal with thousand eyes of consciousness. Thus like the Sun Indra was worshipped as a conscious omniscient Being.

Indra in the Upanishads

In the Chhandogya Upanishad there is a popular anecdote about Indra acquiring self-knowledge. One day Brahma said : "Search for Him, He, Who is stainless, changeless, deathless and free from hunger and thirst ; look for Him, He Who is established in Truth. He Who knows Him has nothing more to desire." Hearing this Indra and Virochana came to Brahma with the sacred samidha wood in their hands and for 32 years remained celibate students. Brahma said : "That Purusha who manifests himself before our eyes as the immortal one without fear, is Brahma." Virochana erroneously thought that It was the body. He went back happily and preached this materialistic philosophy to the assuras. But Indra, after having gone half-way, came back. He was confused—how can the body be the atman ? The body is mortal and subject to changes. Brahma said : "Yes—that is true." Thus Indra remained a celibate student for another thirty two years. Now Brahma said : "He who reigns supreme in dreams is the immortal fearless atman—the Brahma." But Indra was still in doubt. Dreams are often unpleasant and irrelevant. What is great about it ? So Indra came back and again became a brahmacharin. After another thirty two years Brahma now said : "It is the transcendental stage when the jiva is in susupti and is in that deep stage which is dreamless sleep." But Indra reasoned: "In susupti all sense of 'I' consciousness is lost and so too are all feelings of the world around. This is akin to the destruction and the negation of death." Again Indra

repaired to the hermitage of his Guru for real knowledge. This time another five years had elapsed before Brahma told the secret that the atman can be realised only at the Tuiya level which is beyond the stages of waking (jagaran), dream (swapna) and dreamless sleep (susupti). "Oh Lord of the clouds—this body is definitely mortal. Death will gradually claim it. But this finite body is the abode of the eternal and infinite. That atman being connected to the body becomes subject to the upward and downward swings of good-bad and joy-despair. The atman identified with the body cannot but be overwhelmed by these extremes. But if the atman breaks free, then nothing can touch It." After many many years of dedicated service, control of the senses and introspection, Indra gained realisation. He came back to the heavens and preached to the gods true knowledge. The gods thus worshipped him as the greatest amongst them for taking to them this message of immortality. Herein lies Indra's greatness and uniqueness.

Indra in the Purāṇas

Like the Vedas and Upanishads, the Puranas too abound in legends of Indra. Here only a few are recounted.

The unconquerable Indra of the Vedas is not always so in the Puranas. In the Puranas, often has Indra been vanquished and consequently the other gods too had to pay the penalty. In the Ramayana, Ravana's brave son Meghnad defeats Indra. After much loss of face the gods managed to free him. The Chandi narrates that Indra was banished from his heaven by Mahisasura after fighting for a hundred long years. Indra got back his kingdom only after Devi Mahamaya had appeared and killed the asura. Harivamsa says Indra was defeated by another asura name Hiranakshya. Later, Sri Vishnu killed the evil one. During Dakshayajna, Indra was humiliated at the hands of Virabhadra. It also narrated that Viswamitra's curse had made Indra become feeble and the asuras could repeatedly punish him. Vishnu Purana says that the sons of Raji had once forced Indra out of

heaven and he could regain it only with the help of Vrihaspati. The Mahabharata recounts the incident of Sri Krishna bringing the Parijat flower for Queen Satyabhama after defeating Indra. Indra suffered humiliation at the hands of various other asuras—Hiranyakashipu, Andhak, Prahlad, Vali etc. By his might Vali had become master of the three worlds and Indra could recover his loss only when Vishnu, in the guise of a dwarf, tricked Vali to grant him land measuring three steps. Earth is not free from the menace of the titans. When Khandava forest was being burnt, Indra tried but failed to check Arjuna.

From Devi Bhagawat and Vayupurana we learn that when Shukracharya, went to Mahadeva to acquire the mantra of success, Indra took the chance to attack the asuras. Helpless, the latter sought the help of the wife of Bhrigu, Khyati. Khyati stunned Indra with her display of yogic powers. Indra had no alternative but to turn to Vishnu for help. For the good of the gods Vishnu decapitated the head of Khyati. Bhrigu was furious at this injustice and cursed Vishnu that seven times he would have to be born as a mortal. Bhrigu's powers however rejuvenated his wife. But this again made Indra apprehensive. After much consideration he hit upon a plan and sent his own daughter Jayanti to captivate the meditating Shukracharya. Devyani was the daughter of this union of Jayanti and Stukracharya. She become enamoured of Kacha, son of Vrihaspati. But Kacha did not reciprocate and so Devjani later married King Yajati.

Pauranic Indra seems to be dominated by the fear of losing his throne. One can become a Indra by performing one hundred horse sacrifices. Thus Indra was ever alert to thwart any king endeavouring to complete these exercises. The austerities of sages and seers also made him suspicious about their intentions on his heaven. And therefore he would send the celestial dancers Urvasi, Rambha, Menaka etc. to tempt the rishis. Temporarily they were often enamoured and strayed from the path. But that was for some time only. The seekers of liberation were not interested in heaven and in their case Indra's fears were often unfounded.

Indra's parents were Aditi, the mother of the gods and the great seer Kashyap. The name of Indra's kingdom is Amaravati. At Amaravati there is a well laid out pleasure-garden named Nandan Kanan, where reigns an unfailing flow of amusement. Here blooms rows of the exquisite Parijat flowers. Indra's residential palace and chariot are known as Vaijayanti and Vimana respectively. Matali is his charioteer ; Ucchaisrova is his horse and Airavat his elephant. Indrachap is his bow and Vajra is his main weapon.

Diti is Indra's step-mother. Diti was expecting a child by Kashyap and she too wanted a son like Indra. But Aditi was a jealous co-wife. She encouraged her son Indra to destroy his enemies. Indra went to Diti's room and at the opportune moment stealthily entered the womb of the sleeping Diti. Then he cut up the foetus into seven pieces and when the infants began to wail he chopped up each part again, telling them "ma rudi" or "don't cry". These forty nine children of Diti were the Maruts and to please Diti, Indra accepted each one to be his assistant.

Like Diti, King Kusha too wanted a son like Indra and for this purpose he began to observe austerities. This time also Indra became disturbed but did not show jealousy. Instead he himself took birth as King Kusha'a son and was known as Kaushik Gadhi.

The Devibhagawat narrates that for the welfare of the gods Indra once became the vahana or carriage of King Kukustha of the Ikshaku dynasty. Defeated by the asuras the gods had sought the help of this king. But the king wanted Indra himself to be his vahana. Thus Indra carried the king to the warfront and the asuras were defeated.

In the Ramayana we find Indra conceal the sacrificial horse of King Sagar in the nether world hermitage of the sage Kapila. The 60,000 sons of Sagar came upon the tied horse and blamed Kapila for this theft. The enraged innocent sage burnt to ashes the sons of Sagar. Apparently Indra's behaviour is whimsical but in the long run it brought the river Ganga to earth. The curses of the seer thus turned into a blessing.

Vayupurana tells the story of Indra killing the god-hating grand-sons of Shukracharya (sons of Varutri) like animals at the sacrificial altar. They were trying to annihilate yajna and worship. Satpatha Brahmana recounts that Indra had cut off the head of the asura Namuchi with his Bajra because Namuchi had stolen Indra's Soma vessel.

The Aswa as Indra's Vāhana

Ucchaisrova is the name of Indra's horse. There is an obvious similarity between the king of gods and this beast renowned for its valour. (Rig Veda 6/46/94) Indra is also known as the wind-god and who else but the speedy horse should carry him ?

The Elephant as Indra's Vāhana

The kshatriya kings and their cohorts used the elephant like the horse, in warfare and for hunting. Thus we find that the king of elephants, Airavat, as Indra's vahana.

There is however another point of agreement. Elephants often playfully frolic in water and spray each other with their trunks. From afar the sprinkling water amidst dusty elephants seems to be rain. And it is with rainfall that the name of Indra is closely associated.

CHAPTER X

YAMA

Hymn

Om vaivasvataṁ mahākāyaṁ daṇḍapāśakaradvayam
piṅgordhvakeśaṁ dhyāyecca mahiṣopari saṁsthitam ||

Meditate on the blonde Yama, the corpulent son of Surya, upholding the staff and pasha, seated on a bison.

Salutations

Om yamastvaṁ pitṛlokānāṁ śāstāvai karmiṇāṁ nṛṇām |
Phaladaḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ yamo'pi varado bhava ||
Om yamarājaḥ namastubhyaṁ namaste yamunāgraja |
Trāhi māṁ kiṅkaraiḥ sārdhaṁ sūryaputra namo'stute ||

Hail to Yama ! You are the king of Pitriloka (a stage after the death of the body), the giver of the fruits of our works and the all determiner. Grant me boons. I pay obeisance to the son of Surya, the elder brother of Yamuna.

Yama in Rigveda

Yama is a Vedic deity but nowhere has he been referred to as a god — he is always King Yama. In the hymn too there is a difference. Hitherto the gods have been saluted as 'mahabhaga' but Yama is the corpulent one —'mahakaya'. Nevertheless great respect is accorded to Yama. The Rigveda says that the souls of the departed go up to the heavens and get to see kings Yama and Varuna. 3 shuktas of Rig Veda's 10th mandala salute Yama. That apart there are about fifty references to him.

Viviswan and Saranyu are Yama's parents. Saranyu is the daughter of Twasta who had given birth to two sets of twins.

The first pair were the Yama and Yamini and the second were the Aswinis. Yamini is the same as Yamuna. In the Rigveda there is a shukta embodying the conversation between Yama and Yamini. Vaivaswat muni is Yama's step brother.

The hymn on Yama and the Rigvedic salutations to Yama sum him up from all angles. He is the god of Death. His is the path of death. He is an incarnation of Death. Thus salute the seers.

Yama shows the path for us — the track carved out by our own works. Our forefathers too have followed this course. Yama comes down with our forefathers to partake of the yajna. Yaman and Varuna are pleased to accept swadha or the offerings of respect. The place that Yama gives us is ever filled with daylight; is ever illumined ; is ever blessed with water. Further it is said that Yama's residence is a creation of the gods and filled with an incessant flow of music and tunes of the flute.

Then why is this grand magnificent Yama associated with fear ?

He spells doom to the sinful and this is but natural. But to the virtuous Yama means a place for shelter and happiness with the ancestors.

Two dogs guard the gates of Yama. They are ferocious. Their complexion and nature are peculiar. Rig Veda says that these dogs have four eyes and a long nose. Not easily satisfied they thirstily hunt for souls. They guard the gates of Yama and none can evade their notice. Yama alone can free us from fear of these dogs.

Yama's share of the yajna is Trikadruk—Savitri's share is two third while Yama gets a third. Yama's favourite is Agni. Agni is Yama's priest. Yama also accompanies Surya, Chandra, Usha, Ratri etc. In a sense Agni, Yama, Matariswa and other gods are one and the same. In one shukta they are said to be the companions of our predecessors specially the Angiras.

In the mantras on medicinal herbs (Rig 10/97/16) it is said that Yama carries in his hands the chains that bind the feet of the dead. The assistants of Yama drag the deceased by this chain. These are known as the bonds of death. The over enthusiastic personnel of Yama often untimely start pulling unfortunate victims. It is said that the timely and proper use of medicine will cause these chains to fall off. Actually this mantra is in praise of medicines. Although none is immortal, treatment can check premature death.

Apart from the dogs, the gates of Yama are guarded by an owl and a pigeon.

Yama in the Upanishad

The image of Yama conjured in the Rigveda causes both fear as well as fearlessness. But in the Upanishads, Yama is characterised as Vedantacharya or a scholar expounding knowledge of the scriptures. We are referring to the Kathapanishad in which there is an illuminating discussion between Yama and Nachiketa on Self-realisation.

Nachiketa, the son of Vajasrava of the family of Gautama, being truthful to his father's words, reached the domain of Yama. But it so happened that Yama was not at home. When Yama returned after three days, he was sorry to see that his guest, Nachiketa, was awaiting his host's hospitality. For this shortcoming Yama wished to appease him by offering Nachiketa three boons. What could Nachiketa ask for from Yama ? Firstly he wanted his father's anger to cool. Secondly he wanted to know of the sacred fire that leads to heaven. Lastly he wanted knowledge of Death. Man pleases the ancestors to reach the layer of pitriloka ; pleases the gods to reach heaven but knowledge of the Great-Beyond is the greatest and the rarest ! Nachiketa, following one order after another and finally wanted this very thing. The first two boons were easily granted. But this Self-knowledge could not be given to the unworthy. So, one by one Nachiketa's worth came to be tested.

Yama said, "What will you do with Self-Knowledge ? It is better you ask for wealth, riches, children, grandchildren, bondmaids, kingdoms or even immortality." Although a mere lad, Nachiketa was wise and was in search of Truth. He logically argued that those empirical objects were noneternal, meaningless and ultimately led to suffering. Thus Self-knowledge was what he wanted to know and get. However, it is true that he who has tasted of immortality recognises Truth. Thoughts on death awaken the pure consciousness in man and lead to renunciation of the trivial and makes him go inward towards the core of his being. Herein Nachiketa had come face to face with death. Thus it is natural that he would want Self-Knowledge and nothing else. Yama was overjoyed to see the lad's searching for the Self and decided that he was worthy of receiving that Great Secret. Nachiketa realised that the senses are greater than the gross sensual objects and organs ; that the mind is more subtle than the senses ; that the intellect is greater than the mind ; that knowledge is greater than intellect and that the greatest is the Unmanifest. But, over and above is that Purusha, the Self. There is nothing to know beyond This. He is the charioteer seated in the chariot of the body. This Atman can not be realised by argument, by studying of Vedas, by listening to the Vedas or by intellect. Only by the grace of Self can the Self be realised. The order is to climb the steps one by one — from the senses to the mind ; from the mind to the intellect ; from intellect to wisdom ; from wisdom to the unmanifest and from that to become one with the Witness of all. But the path is not smooth — it is sharp as a razor. But that should not lead to despair. "Do not stop". Yama told his disciple Nachiketa - "Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached." *

"Uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varannivodhata"

So, saying Yama made him arise, made him awake and made him seek that which is far off — the greatest knowledge, the knowledge of the Self. The Kathapanishad recounts many such sayings of Yama.

Yama in the Purāṇas

Like the other gods, there are many tales about Yama in the Puranas. The Skanda Purana says that to the good and pure, Yama appears calm and serene. But to the wicked he is a terror. To the latter Yama's eyes are blood-shot, his teeth are bared, his tongue is flashing and his locks are flying upwards. He is fierce. This Purana tells us that after observing stern austerities at Kashi, Yama had got this role from Mahadeva. Situated in the southern part of the world, the domain of Yama is unparalleled in beauty and splendour. It is golden and decorated with gates. The houses are bejwelled and the courtyards are closely arranged in neat squares. The network of streets that criss-cross the city are lined with melodious bells and punctuated with ponds and gardens. The city dwellers are always in the midst of festivities. Yama's chief official is Chitragupta. Chitragupta's subordinate is another trustworthy cleric named Vichitra. All creatures have to get their names entered in their books at some time or the other. Neither you nor I can expect respite :

In Matsya Purana, Yama is one of the twelve Adityas. He rides a bison and his principal weapon is the mace. Yama rules his subjects well. He is all that is holy and just. Yama is also known as Sraddha-deva. From Vamana Purana it has been possible to salvage the name of the animal Yama rides. The bison is called Pundrak. Pundrak, appearing out of the energy of Rudra, is jet black and is fast as the mind. But Vayu Purana says that Yama rides two elephants — Anjan and Samkirna. They are the children of Sweta, the daughter of Pulaha.

According to Harivamsa, Brahma gave Yama the right to rule over the ancestors. Indra gave the southern regions of earth to be Yama's domain.

On more than one occasion we find Yama in the role of a warrior. Padma Purana says Yama fought against the asuras. In the Ramayana, Narada, the great tease, had once instigated Ravana against Yama. Yama too prepared for an encounter, but unfortunately that never took place. Brahma came and pacified

Yama because it was Brahma himself who had promised Ravana that except for man and monkey, none would be able to vanquish Ravana. But if Death himself became Ravana's opponent then who could guarantee the latter's victory ? If Ravana had met his end at the hands of Yama, then Brahma's prestige would have been at stake. For his own self-respect Brahma stalled Yama.

In the Mahabharata, when Skanda was installed as the commander of the gods, Yama sent Unmatha and Pramatha to assist him. In this epic, the name of Yama's wife is Dhumorna. Padma Purana agrees with this. But Brahmavaivarta Purana mentions Kshama and Varunani to be the wives of Yama. Yama is childless. This was the outcome of a curse by a brahmin named Upadhyaya. Yama takes the life of mortals and thus it is not unlikely that he should be often cursed. Faced with this inevitability the helpless Yama turned to Brahma. Brahma, after deep meditation, created one hundred and eight ailments and ruled that henceforth mortals will fall ill and suffer death. Thus Yama would be spared the blame.

Yama was once cursed by his step-mother Chhaya. Samjna was the mother of Yama and Yami. Surya's wife Samjna, unable to bear anymore the heat of Surya, left her double, Chhaya, to impersonate her and escaped to her father's home. Chhaya cared for her own and neglected her step-children. Saddened, Yama complained to Vivaswan. Upon hearing of this Chhaya cursed Yama : "Immediately be damned to become the king of the nether world." To somewhat counter this fate of his son, Surya said : "Maybe you will be Lord of Death but you will weigh their vices and virtues and as the judge, rule heaven."

Yama's Propensity of Righteousness

In the Upanishads, Yama expounds Self-knowledge and in the Mahabharata he takes on the role of the initiator of good works done for the welfare of mortals. He advised a seer named Gautama about observing truth, austerities and serving parents.

He explained to a brahmin, residing in the middle country, about the necessity of offering til seeds, lamps, grains and clothes. King Sashavindhu was advised by Yama about the auspicious days of ancestor worship.

Yama and Savitri-Satyavān

The story of Savitri-Satyavan in the Mahabharata's Vanaparba is an eternally twinkling star illuminating our horizons. Yama wanted to reward Savitri for her devotion towards her husband. The Lord of Death never discards the one he has once accepted, but to honour the faithful wife, on this one instance, he had to skip the rules.

King Aswapati observed celibacy for eighteen years and worshipped Savitri to get the boon of a jewel a fiery daughter. He gave her the name of the god—Savitri.

Like the waxing moon Savitri developed day by day until she reached the peak of her youth. None dared to come forward and claim the hand of such an exquisite maiden. Helpless, the king asked her to find her own suitor by herself. Savitri ascended her chariot, and went forth in her search. She came back and told the father of her choice. It was Satyavan, the son of the blind king Dyumatsena who resided in the forest. But alas ! From Narada they came to know that Satyavan's life was very short—he was to live for only another year. But Savitri remained determined in her resolution to marry the one to whom she had once given her heart. So the marriage took place.

After the wedding the princess followed her husband to his home in the forest. There she began to count the days of his life, until only four days were left. Then Savitri began to observe severe austerities. On the dawn of the final day she performed homa (fire-worship) and fasted. Satyavan, ignorant of his fate, prepared to go deep into the woods to collect firewood. On the plea of frolicking in the forest Savitri pressed to accompany him. None knew the deep secret in her heart.

Satyavan, after collecting firewood and fruits, prepared himself to return to the woodland shelter, when suddenly an intense headache overpowered him. To rest, he surrendered himself onto the lap of his beloved wife. Sleep came down—the eternal slumber of death. Yama himself came to claim the soul of Satyavan from his body. Lifeless, Satyavan's body lay cold on the earth.

Yama walked on but Savitri followed. Yama said : " Go back and perform the last rites of your husband." Savitri replied : "Oh king ! How can that be ? Where can a wife go without her husband ? His destiny is her destiny." Yama was very pleased with her devotion and offered a boon. Savitri asked for the eye-sight of her blind father-in-law. But even after being granted this boon Savitri continued to follow Yama. In due course she won three boons. Dyumatsena got back his lost kingdom ; her father Aswapati was blessed with hundred sons ; she too was provided a hundred sons by Satyavan. Yama agreed to each of her requests but even then he found her not giving up his trail. Again Yama tried to make her change her mind but she firmly replied that heaven was not her goal. Her only aim was her husband. If she was to go back at all then it will not be without begging for his life. But how can that be ? Can the dead ever go back to life? Perhaps not but Yamaraja himself was bound by his own ruling. He was tricked by Savitri's play of words, for Yama had blessed her with a hundred sons. Without returning her husband back to Savitri, this truth could not be honoured. Thus gladly Yama kept his word and himself went back empty-handed to his abode.

Even today this legend of a wife's love and devotion is fresh in the hearts of Hindu India. With deep respect and intensity it is read, spoken, heard and discussed. It is the story of the wife who with her devotion, love and faith conquered Death.

Yama, the Ideal Brother

Yama and Yami are two flowers on one stem. They are the ideal siblings. There lies between brother and sister a great af-

fection and unity. Even today on the auspicious occasion of Bhratridwitiya this bond between Yama and Yami is recalled. The sister offers food, garments and annoints her elder or younger brother with sandalwood paste. Yami was the first one to do so. On the auspicious occasion of Brother's-day each sister chants this.

Bhrātastavānujātāhaṁ bhuṅkṣva bhaktamidaṁ śubham |*
Prītaye yamarājasya yamunāyā viśeṣataḥ ||

Thus both Yama and Yami are pleased when they see other sisters saluting their brothers. And if the god of death and his sister are pleased then the mortals have nothing to fear from Yama ; the doors of Yama are sealed with a barbed wire net of thorns.

The Dog as Yama's Sentinel

In the Vedas and Puranas Yama's guards are two ferocious dogs ; sometimes the owl or the pigeon precede him ; he is carried by the elephant and the buffalo. But why ?

First let us turn our attention to the sentinels. Guards are needed to be alert about whosoever seeks entry. In Yama's household the sentry has a special duty because the good are to be rewarded and the wicked punished. Only the virtuous can gain access to Yama. The others are to suffer the twenty one hells of Raurab, Kumbhipak, Vaitarani, Taptakurimi etc. It is at the entrance that the groups are to be divided and for this the dog is the most suitable animal. This intelligent beast can take instructions and is ever alert. With a strong sense of smell it can easily make a distinction between the familiar and the strange ; the beloved and the unwanted ; the friend or foe ; good and bad etc. As and when required the dog translates its master's orders into action with sharp teeth and claws. There is really no better guard then the dog. The dog, roaming the cremation ground in search of flesh of the dead is a common sight.

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*Bhrātastavāgrajātāhaṁ

Yama, the god of Death, is incessantly in search of prey and pulling mortals into his proximity. His assistants find out whose time is drawing to an end. the Dog, as the renowned hunter, is one of Yama's servants. The mood of the Lord of Death is aptly reflected in this cannine.

The Pigeon as Yama's messenger

The pigeon is the ambassador who carries messages. Yama has to be kept informed in minute details of the good or bad activities of each. Who will bring him the news ? Here the pigeon is of service as a newsreporter. The pigeon has been used for this purpose from time immemorial. During the last two great wars the Homer—pigeons were indispensible as message carriers. It is learnt that our defence sector is imparting training to pigeons of this breed. The speciality of these birds are that no matter how far they are sent, with unerring instinct they return to base.

The pigeon is also a symbol of peace. Lately it has become the custom in many countries to release pigeons as a mark of peace. This had been a frequent gesture of good will towards world peace by our late Prime Minister Nehru. Dharmaraja Yama has one distinctive side to his character—apart from the negative side of eliminating life, he gives shelter, rest and peace to tired mortals. His pigeons flutter this message of hope to the weary one nearing his innings.

The Owl as Yama's Ambassador

Like the dog, the owl too is a devourer of meat ; a cruel killer and sharp hunter. The nocturnal bird of prey sweeps down on the unsuspecting victim and tears them apart with its talons. Both Yama and the owl dance to the tune of death. Secondly, both attack silently and without warning. The flapping wings are hardly audible. Death too walks stealthily and strikes suddenly. It overpowers us at all odd hours—in the middle of festivites,

routine activities or sweet slumber. Cholera, accident, fire or even a small fish bone may sign our death warrant.

Yama and His Vāhana the Elephant

In the hymn, Yama has been referred to as the corpulent one. So too is the elephant. In the animal world the elephant is renowned for his strength and valour. An enraged elephant seems to be the personification of Death itself. A swirl of its trunk can whirl us to the doors of Yamalaya, the residence of Yama. That apart, Yama being the king should rightfully be carried by the elephant.

The Buffalo as Yama's Vāhana

The buffalo is more popularly known to be the vahana of Yama. This choice seems to be more appropriate. Like Yama, two contradictory characteristics are present in the buffalo. The outward appearance of both are very fierce. The massive snorting beast rolling his large eyes seem to be ready to charge with his horns at any moment. The wild bison is even more fearful. They live together in herds deep in forests and care little for even tigers and lions. Man is of no consequence to them.

But the same animal, when tamed, is harmless and of great use to others. The domesticated breed pulls our carts and ploughs the soil. Its bones, skin and horns are all made good use of. The thick milk of the buffalo nourishes and sustains man and is of special benefit in the cure of specific diseases. The buffalo ranks second to the cow in its usefullness to mankind. This aspect of the animal is in conformity with that side of Yama's character which upholds society with truth and righteousness.

CHAPTER XI

LAKṢMI

Hymn on Lakshmī

Pāśākṣamālikāmbhojasṛṇibhiryāmyasaumāyo |
Padmāsanasthāṁ dhyāyecca śṛyaṁ trailokyamātaram ||
Gouravarṇāṁ surūpāñca sarvālaṅkārabhūṣitām |
Raukmapadmavyagrakarāṁ varadāṁ dakṣiṇena tu ||

Meditate on the devi seated in a lotus position, who is holding the pasha, string of heads, golen lotus, ankus and is blessing us. She is the fair Mother of the three worlds and symbolises grace, beauty and prosperity.

Hymn of Mahalakṣmī

Mahālakṣmī's dhyān

Vālārkadyutimindukhaṇḍavilasat koṭīrahārojjvalām |
Ratnākalpavibhūṣitāṁ kucanataṁ śāleḥ
Karairmañjarīm ||
Padmaṁ kaustubharatnamapyāviratāṁ
Saṁvibhratīṁ sasmitām |
Phullāmbhojavilocanatrayayutāṁ dhyāyet
parāmvikām ||

Kāntyā kāñcanasannibhāṁ
himagiriprakhyaiścaturbhirgajairhastot |
Kṣiptahiraṇmayāmṛtaghaṭairāsicyamānāṁ śṛyam ||
Vibhrāṇāṁ varamabjayugmabhayaṁ hastaiḥ
kirīṭojjvalām |
Kṣaumāvaddhanitambavimbalālitaṁ
vande'ravindasthitām ||

Her complexion is as fair as dawn ; a slice of the moon is her tiara ; bejewelled, adorned with a glittering necklace, the lotus,

the kaustav gem and a sheaf of grains, her heavy bosoms bend with their weight. Meditate on the divine Mother whose three eyes are like blooming lotus flowers.

Hymn on Lakṣmī's Character

Her complexion is the gold of the sun. Four elephants, as large as mountains annoint her with the nectar of water. She holds two blooming lotus flowers, is adorned with a glittering tiara and is attired in fine raiment whose borders are exquisite in beauty. Seated in a lotus position she grants boons and reassures us.

Salutations

Lakṣmīḥ śrīḥ kamalā vidyā mātā viṣṇupṛyā satī ।
Padmālayā padmahastā padmākṣī padmasundarī ।
Bhūtānāmīśvarī nityā matā satyāgatā śubhā ॥
Viṣṇupatnī mahādevī kṣīrodatanayā kṣamā ।
Anantalokalābhā ca bhūlīlā ca sukhapradā ।
Rukminī ca tathā sītā mā vai vedavatī śubhā ।
Etāni puṇyanāmāni prātaruthāya yaḥ paṭhet ।
Mahāśṛyamavāpnoti dhanadhānyamakalmaṣam ॥

Sri, Kamala, Vidya, Mata, Vishnupriya, Sati, Padmalaya, Padmahasta, Padmakshi, Padmasundari, Ishwari of the Bhutas, Nitya, Satyagata, Subha, Vishnupatni, Kshirodatanaya, Kshamarupa, Anantalokalabha, Bhulila, Sukhaprada, Rukmini, Sita, Vedavati – these are some of the names of Lakshmi. He who rises at dawn and chants these names, gains untainted, unbounded wealth and prosperity.

The Total Picture that is Lakṣmī

From the above the comprehensive picture that we get of Lakshmi is as follows. She holds the two weapons pasha and ankus ; her hue is the gold of dawn ; four huge elephants continously annoint her with water ; she who has made her ap-

pearance from the oceans is Rukmini, Sita, Sukhaprada and Bhulila ; she holds the lotus and sheaf of grains ; on her breast rests the Kaustav gem ; she assures us freedom from fear ; she is the eternal, ever faithful symbol of good fortune. She is Kamala and Sri.

In Agni Purana it is said that Lakshmi is the knowledge of yajna ; of Self-Realisation ; of all knowledge, Secret or Great. It is she who grants us Liberation.

Yajñavidyā mahāvidyā guhyavidyā ca śobhanā |
Ātmavidyā ca devi tvaṁ vimuktiphaladāyinī ||

Here we see Lakshmi as our spiritual guide. But in Devi Bhagawat her role as giver of material prosperity is very clear. She is saluted as the goddess of commerce ; of agriculture and of all livelihood. She is also the source of that wealth from which sprouts enmity and discord. She is the Swargalakshmi in the heavens, Rajlakshmi in kingdoms and Grihalakshmi in households. She establishes the harmony of peace and prosperity. Free from the rulings of the six senses, she is the Compassionate One.

In short, Lakshmi is a manifestation of wealth, knowledge and character. She is Kamala because in her blooms everything and she is as beautiful as the flower. Her eyes are like the lotus and in her hand she holds the lotus. She is seated in the lotus posture.

We should know that the lotus is a symbol of illumination.

Lakṣmī as the river

We have already discussed Saraswati as a river. Like her, Lakshmi the goddess of wealth has been also conceived of as a river. It is popularly held that to fulfill a curse, Lakshmi descended on earth as the river Padma. We are blessed that she flows through the centre of Bengal and transformed this land into swaying fertile green fields. We have clothes to wear and food to eat. The lotus floats on the river banks and the association of the goddess and the flower is not far to seek.

Lakṣmī the Goddess of Wealth

Generally we worship Lakshmi as the goddess of wealth. We desire wealth and so it is customary to worship Kuber together with Lakshmi. But it is necessary to see the significance between the conjured image of Lakshmi and of wealth.

The fundamentals of prosperity centre around (1) forest and agriculture ; (2) minerals ; (3) oceans ; (4) trade ; (5) animal husbandry ; (6) art and craft and (7) conquests.

The hymn and salutations on Lakshmi covers each of these aspects.

Lakṣmī and Agriculture

Earth gives us grains, seeds, fruits and forest products. Keeping this in view Lakshmi has been adulated as Bhulila. She is also Sita or the plough. Rain is a must and thus Lakshmi holds the ankus of Indra, the god of rain. On the occasion of Kojagari Lakshmi puja, Indra too is worshipped along with Lakshmi. Rainfall is intimately connected with the waters of the ocean and the heat of the sun. Thus Lakshmi also displays the pasha of Varuna the god of water. Lakshmi is the wife of the greatest among the twelve Adityas. Her complexion is the blush of the rising sun. Rebanta the son of Surya, as well as Varuna are also worshipped with Lakshmi. The four elephants sprinkling water symbolise the unfailing blessing of rainfall on earth. Lakshmi holds the golden grain and is worshipped in the season of autumn when the yellow of the fertile earth is the tinge of her complexion.

Lakṣmī and Mineral Wealth

While the harvest sways on the top of the earth, deep in her bowels is her mineral wealth. Thus the name of Bhulila is applicable in both cases. Amongst minerals, gold is the dearest to man's heart. It is the standard of foreign exchange. From rukma or gold Lakshmi is named Rukmini and holds in her hand a

golden lotus. The priceless kaustav and other gems adorn her pointing to her as the goddess of mineral wealth.

The Ocean and Lakşmī

Another source of treasure is the sea. The other name of the ocean is Ratnakar. Apart from pearls, corals, conch-shells, fish, oil, natural gas etc. we are still very much ignorant of the vast store of treasures deep below the waves. From ancient times man has been trying to fathom ocean depths as is well illustrated in the ancient legends. The Puranas hold that Lakshmi is a child of the ocean and manifested herself when the gods and demons together churned the waters. The legend has a inner meaning. The gods by themselves could not execute such an immense task and so they had to come to an understanding with the asuras. This co-operation was not in vain. Lakshmi manifested herself. In other words, priceless treasures came out of the churning and it is an eternal truth that a war is bound to break out over division of the spoils. The bloody feud between the devas and asuras was its natural consequence.

The Development of Commerce and Lakşmī

"Vanijya Basate Lakshimī" Lakshmi is the goddess of trade and commerce. Even today in East Bengal tradition, a boat is carved out of the bark of a banana tree and filled with grains, merchandise etc. After puja, this is floated on rivers, nearby ponds, lakes or waterways with much fanfare. In this way, days of yore are recalled when ships sailed to distant lands from our Indian shores. What was a reality yesterday is today a folk ritual. Many years ago the seths and traders, before venturing forth in a flotilla of seven ships (saptadinga) laden with food stuff and merchandise, invoked the blessings of Lakshmi. Ahead of them lay unchartered rivers and seas of tossing waves and fickle fortunes.

Lakṣmī and Animal Husbandry

The prosperity of a country includes its animal wealth - cows, bulls, horses, goats, elephants etc. Thus man's welfare is linked with their fortunes. Ancient India gave great attention to animal welfare and far better arrangements for their upkeep was then in vogue. In modern times, advanced nations give top priority to animal husbandry, application of latest scientific knowledge and technique. Lakshmi inspires us in this field. On the night of the Kojagari full moon, the owners of cows worship Surabhi the mother of cows ; goat owners worship Hutasan (god of fire) ; sheep owners worship Varuna ; elephant owners worship Vinayak and horse owners worship the king of horses, Rebanta. Without their worship Lakshmi puja remains incomplete. The country's all round economic prosperity includes animal wealth.

Lakṣmī and State Power

Regaining lost frontiers and extending state power are two of the worldly boons Mahalakshmi may grant to us of her own sweet will. A hundred years of warfare with Mahisasura had left Indra, King of the gods, defeated and exiled. At such a critical juncture Lakshmi, as Devi Bhagawati appeared, killed the demons and reinstated the gods. By worshipping her, king Surath and Ramachandra had also got back their lost fortunes. Lakshmi is worshipped in autumn as Saradidurga, in fall as Katyanidurga and in spring as Vasantidurga. It is said that the kings of Bharat used to worship the unvanquished Durga in Autumn and after conquering foreign lands, when they returned victorious loaded with wealth, they performed Lakshmi puja to thank her for their fortunes. Kojagari Lakshmi puja on the night of the full moon symbolises success and prosperity in all spheres of life. Today perhaps the style of making conquests has changed, but the age old idea of extending frontiers of influence and control is the same and ever present.

Lakṣmī and Industrial Wealth

We have listed agriculture, commerce, minerals etc. as yardsticks of wealth. Another important vital factor is industry. There are many countries whose prime support is industry. Industry encompasses a vast field of multifarious activities. Thus no country has ever been able, in any age past or present, to ignore it. Without industry economic progress is impossible.

We have seen in Chapter V that Viswakarma is the god of the artisan. But it is also true that neither big nor small scale industry can be established without capital wealth. Moreover the finished product must have artistic and aesthetic appeal to meet market demands. Thus merely amassing wealth and capital will be a futile task. Industry is intimately linked with both capital and the likes and dislikes of the market. Thus behind Viswakarma is Lakshmi's inspiration and support.

The Fickle Lakṣmī

Lakshmi is said to be fickle and this is usually applicable to our economic fortunes. Four reasons are given for this. (1) Commerce involves transfer from hand to hand. (2) If the foolish come into money, invariably it goes to his head and leads to wayward behaviour. Wealth has the power to sometimes cause even the wise and best among men to miss their steps. (3) At a certain level wealth provokes jealousy, warfare, litigation etc. (4) There are innumerable instances of the rich becoming poor and vice versa. The wheels of fortune are ever in motion. Perhaps this is what led Shankaracharya, the lion amongst Vedantins, to say that wealth is at the root of all evil. But the wise man of character uses money for selfless service to the country. Their very lives are based upon welfare for others. The use or misuse of wealth depends on the owner of this great power.

Lakṣmī and Character-Formation

Where does Lakshmi reside ? Is it in the heavens alone ? Is it confined to agriculture, commerce and state treasury ? No, cer-

tainly not. We have already said that Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, knowledge and character. She is eternally present amongst man of taste, character and upbringing. Where these qualities are absent, Lakshmi never, even by mistake, makes an appearence. In Brahmavaivarta Purana the goddess herself expounds this principle.

She says : "I never enter homes that do not respect the Guru, God, parents, relations and guests. I am averse to go to them who are liars, who always whine and complain, who are weak of character and vulgar. I never consort with the untruthful, with those who give false witness, are traitors and ungrateful ; with those who constantly worry, are fearful and afraid of enemies ; with those who are in debt, or miserly, without initiation, sorrowful and give bad advice ; those who are slaves of their spouses, husbands of unfaithful women, foul-mouthed, fond of quarrels and are against worship of god and the taking of His name ; those who do not wash their feet before going to sleep ; who sleep without wearing clothes, who over-sleep or sleep at dawn, during day or in the evening, those who do not clean their teeth, whose cloths are dirty, whose hair is dry and tousled and whose smile is false. I enter only those homes where dwells the white pigeon ; where the harvest is golden ; where rice is silver and where the grains are husked ; my beloved is that householder who shares his possessions equally with all the members ; who is soft-spoken, cares for elders, is pleasing in appearance, speaks the minimum and does not exaggerate ; is religious, in control of his senses, humble in learning, without pride, loves his mother, cares for sufferings of others, who bathes carefully, eats quckly, does not inhale the flowers plucked for the gods, does not covet spouses of others and is in control of himself. He is dear to me who has the qualities of renunciation, truthfulness, cleanliness and respectfullness. Amongst these, renunciation occupies the highest place and is commendable when applied at the right time and place by the right person.

I reside in that woman who has taken lessons from her guru, who respects her Guru, who never neglects the words of her husband and who partakes of his left-over meals. I am there with women who are contented, brave, soft-spoken, of good fortune, attractive, gracious, pleasant and faithful.''

Not just money and prestige but character is the greatest wealth. Those who are pure and righteous in thought and action, easily become Lakshmi's favourite. This has been strongly underlined in the words of the Devi.

Lakṣmī and Spiritualism

In Atharva Veda's Nrisimgha Tapini Upanishad's second volume's second mantra, Mahalaxmi is the exponent of the Gayatri mantra. It has twenty four alphabets. It is Mahalakshmi who manifests Brahma as Nrisimgha. Thus this Mahalakshmi mantra is primarily spiritual. This is also clear in popular salutations to her. She is Vidya, Vidyabati, Vedavati and is everything that is knowledge. She is fair, eternal, faithful and Truth ; she is Self-knowledge, Yajna-knowledge, Great-knowledge and Secret-knowledge. She holds the beads of the rosary and grants Liberation. These slokas remind us that Lakshmi is not only goddess of material wealth but is also our spiritual guide. No wonder Vedantists like Ramanuja and Madhavacharya adulated Lakshmi. These seers cared little for wealth—all they sought was Realisation and Liberation. Lakshmi is the mother of those who worship Vishnu as the father of this cosmos. The mother can be easily approached to get for us the affections of the father. In this way the process of Liberation is hastened.

The Meaning of Kojāgari

There is a saying that on the night of this particular full moon (kojagari) the devi finds out who is awake and accordingly awards wealth.

Niśīthe varadā Lakṣmīḥ ko jāgartītibhāṣiṇī |
Tasmai vittaṁ prayacchāmi akṣaiḥ krīḍāṁ karoti yaḥ ||

'Ko Jaganti' — who is awake ? Who is engaged in the game of Aksha ?

Aksha is a sort of gambling. The foolish and tamasic have interpreted that gambling pleases the goddess on this particular night. Others have twisted the meaning to include stealing fruits and flowers. In another sense Aksha means thoughts on buying and selling. This suits the rajasic mind of the merchant tuned to trade and commerce. The other meanings of Aksha are atman, holy beads etc. The spiritually inclined devotee spends the night counting the beads and meditating on the divinity without asking of anything. For them ''who is awake'' means that Lakshmi enquires into the awakening of their inner being – The Upanishads therefore ask us to arise and awake and be enriched. On the night of Lakshmi puja, Devi knocks from door to door and rewards those who are spiritually awake with treasures of immortality.

Lakṣmī's Vāhana the Owl

It is indeed greatly surprising that, she, who epitomises grace, beauty, fortune and even spiritual knowledge, should have for her carrier this ugly, raucous, blind, ferocious owl. Apparently it seems that in this one choice Lakshmi has faltered. Overlooking other beautiful birds and animals why has she favoured this creature ? Why should the owl, who associates with Yama the god of Death, grace the side of Lakshmi ? Has the owl suddenly turned over a new leaf ? But actually the owl and Lakshmi are perfectly matched – there could not have been a better choice. The owl is the eternal enemy of rats and mice who burgle the grain. That apart the owl has a special significance in acquiring wealth and also in spiritual exercises.

Wealth and the Owl

In all countries, whether capitalistic, communist or socialist, there is a keen scramble for wealth. Not only to day – this has been the pattern from the dawn of mankind. But nowhere has man been able to admit this and make a clean breast of it. Saints and sinners are both engaged in economic activity. The owl co-habitates with both.

During the hours of daylight the owl is a helpless creature and takes shelter in hidden woodland crevices. At night it is a ferocious bird of prey. Innocent fledgelings, unwary frogs and mice are the victims of its sharp claws and beak. Nature has created its wings in such a manner that the flutter cannot be heard. The owl attacks silently, without warning like the stealthy thief. In human society there are many who are ferocious and sly like the owl. They hunt in the dark underworld for Lakshmi's fortunes and live off indiscriminately by bribing, black-marketeering, cheating, forgery, price escalation and arson. Silently they are tearing into the entrails of society. Overnight they want to fill their bellies. These people of darkness worship the Anti-Lakshmi.

Looking at it from another we find that rightly has Lakshmi taken Yama's owl to be her own. Yama stands for righteous-ness. Mother Lakshmi seems to say : "Like my vahana the owl be blind to the wealth of others. By mistake never tread the path of sin and crime ; do not be a parasite, give bribes or let loose a reign of injustice. If you do so, Yama's justice will catch up with you. Look at the owl and remember Yama."

The Owl and Spiritualism

She is the Empress in the heavens. Should we ask from Lakshmi only material wealth ? Certainly not. We have the right to pray for Realisation, for Mother's love and compassion, for freedom from fear and for rest. But how shall we go about it ?

Thoughts on death is our mainstay. This world is an illusion. Wealth, money, life and youth are all non-eternal and ever changing. Death will suddenly strike without any warning. All that will remain is a fistful of ashes on the funeral pyre. Those who constantly remind themselves of this truth, are never ever attracted by the glitter of this world or swayed by the ego. The owl helps to direct our thoughts towards its master. Realisation of the inevitability of death is a positive feeling which enriches our being and negates the poverty of the soul. The lotus petals of the aspirant responds to the call of the inner being and blooms forth. Who can be more fortunate and rich than such an awakened person ?

In a way the behaviour of such a seer is like an owl. In the Gita, Sri Krishna discriminates between the man of self-control and the indulgent one, the righteous and the non-righteous, and the man of enjoyment with the man of renunciation.

Yā niśā sarvabhūtānāṁ tasyāṁ jāgarti saṁyamī |
Yasyāṁ jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśā paśyato muneḥ ||

The masses are dead in sleep unaware of the sun that shines. The illumination of that Sun is only for those who awake to the dawn of that spiritual realisation. What is day to many is darkness to the seer ; and when the masses sleep the spiritual aspirant awakes. This is the peculiarity of the owl.

The owl is a nocturnal creature. Seekers of truth prefer quiet solitude for their spiritual exercises. The owl is secretive. So is the aspirant who shies away from public gaze.

From the owl the seeker has a lot to learn—even from what is considered to be the bird's shortcomings.

CHAPTER XII

ŚĪTALĀ

Hymn to Sitala

Śītalā's Dhyān :

śvetāṅgīṁ rāsabhasthāṁ karayugavilasammārjanīpūrṇa kumbhām |
Mārjanyā pūrṇakumbhādamṛtamayajalaṁ tāpaśāntaiy rkṣipantīm ||
Digvastrāṁ mūrdhiśūrpāṁ kanakamaṇiganairbhūṣitāṅgīm- tṛnetrāṁ |
visphotādyugratāpapraśamanakarīṁ śītalāṁ tāṁ bhajāmi ||

Let us sing hymns of praise to that Sitala whose hue is pure white, who is seated on the ass, who holds the broom in one hand the overflowing pitcher in another (sprinkling the water of immortal nectar), who is without any covering, whose crown is adorned with the kula, with gold and jewels, who has three eyes and who soothes the pain from eruptions.

Vedic Āpa deity and Sitala

Scholars are of the opinion that Sitala is the Pauranic edition of the Vedic Āpa deity. Others are strongly convinced that there is a similarity in nature between the Buddhist goddess Hariti and Sitala.

"Āpo asmānmātaraḥ" / "Uśatīriva mātaraḥ" |
(Rig 10/17/00)

Āpa means water. In the Vedas water is referred to as the Mother. Truly water is as dear to us as our own mother. Water is medicine ; water soothes all suffering and the cure for all our ailments is water. In the language of the Rig Veda—

Āpa idvā u bheṣajīrāpo amīvacātanīḥ |
Āpaḥ sarvasya bheṣajīstāste kṛṇvantu bheṣajam ||
(10|137|6)

In water is contained all our happiness.

Āpo hi ṣṭhā mayobhuvastā | (Rigveda 10|9|1)

This is why water is called the nectar of immortality.

Ap Svantaramṛtam | (Rigveda 1|23|11)

The Vedic Rishis were very much aware of the curative and life-giving qualities of water. Thus they sang praises (hymns they had heard from Soma and the gods)

"Somo'vravīt"

Praśastaye devā bhavata vājinaḥ | (Rigveda)

Strange are the powers of water. Ayurveda warns us that although water taken during meals is a tonic, drinking it at the wrong time can be dangerous. On the other hand when strong medicines fail, water and fresh air breaths new life into ailing bones.

Bhojane amṛtaṁ vāri jīrṇe vāri balapradam |
Ajīrṇe bheṣajaṁ vāri bhojanānte viṣapradam ||

The point here is to find out the similarity between the deity Àp and Sitala. The reader must have noticed that the goddess Sitala holds a pitcher full of water which she sprinkles with a broomstick. It smoothes the pain from boils and eruptions. This pitcher is typical of the Vedic Àp, and therefore it will not be wrong to say that Sitala and the goddess of water are one.

Where illness holds no hope, Sitala is there for strength and comfort. Meditate of Sitala on the navel, in the lotus of the heart and of course in the depths of water. And here lies the signifi cance that water and Sitala one. Since water is by its very nature soothing & cool, it is not an absurdity to surmise that the Vedic deity of Àp has taken on the name of Sitala. In Sanskrit the gender of the word Àp being feminine, she is referred to as mother in the Vedas. Sitala too comes to us as the mother.

The significance of the name Śītalā

As soon as it is pronounced, the name of Sitala cools and soothes us to our very core, But alas ; Like the curse of hydrophobia the name of Sitala usually conjures up images of suffering and fear. She is the dreaded One. It is love mixed with fear that makes us bow to her. Displease her and like grains of lentil seeds the pox epidemic will rage, destroyng all. Thus without delay appease Sitala and arrange her puja. Folksingers are not far behind fanning our fears. Pox is a painful and dangerous curse, The afflicted pine for anything cool or 'sital' from whence is derived the name of Sitala. But devi Sitala does not spread the disease—rather she cures. This will become more clear when we shall analyse the symbols of her image.

The kula on Sitala's forehead

The kula represents the winnowing platter. It adorns Sitala's crown. In East Bengali tradition, women went around carrying Sitala's kula, followed by folk singers & drum beating musicians. At each house this kula or 'magan' was put down in the courtyard to collect alms for Sitala devi's puja.

Why is the kula placed on Sitala's head ? This winnowing platter does two things. Firstly the kula separates the grain from the husk—the essential from the non-essential. Secondly a decorative kula is a must for wedding rituals. Sitala too sieves and blesses—separates pain, sorrow and suffereing to fill our lives with her peaceful blessings. To spread her message pious women carry this symbol of Sitala's kula, from door to door.

Why does Śītalā carry the broomstick ?

Marjani or hingkhari means a broomstick. Why does Sitala hold a marjani—a broom that churns the mire of hell holes, that hits out at the helpless women and is misused in the hand of oppressers ? One should bathe after touching the broom and yet that same marjani adorns the hand of devi Sitala. Before answer-

ing let us put the question in another way—why is it that we treat the broom with such disrespect ? After using it take a hundred dips, by all means. But should we overlook how very useful it is? The word sammarjani means that which cleanses. Will it be possible to be proud of your cleanliness without it's help ? Who is it that sweeps and disposes of all the grime and dust and makes a home out of your house ? This marjani, the broomstick is actually a harbinger and forerunner of cleanliness.

And here lies the greatness of Sitala. That which is shunned by all, is given pride of place by her. She has come forward to do our dirty work. No other deity can claim to have taken on this mantle of selfless service which she symbolises. She sweeps away all the dirt from our lives and makes it free from that which chokes and obstructs the healthy flow of our human existence. This is the broad interpretation fo her hymns which refers to Mother Sitala sprinkling soothing cool water with her marjani.

Why is the complexion of Śītalā fair ?

In our discussion on Saraswati we have seen that white represents truth or sattwa. Water too, by its very nature of being cool and refreshing, represents satya (truth) Aqua has no colour. But if we have to take the help of colour to describe water, the nearest approach is to refer to it as white. Previously we have analysed that Sitala and the Vedic Ap deity are one and the same. And when we mould her in the form of an image, her hue has to be white. The whiteness of sattwa transcends the tamas and rajas invigorating our states of physical, mental and spiritual being.

Why is Śītalā without any convering ?

Who will cover her who is space itself ? Dik or space signifies the vast emptiness. The goddess being omniscient, what is there large enough to cover Her ? She is not a local deity but an

expression of Brahman's healing powers. The ancient rishis of Bharat sang hymns to Sitala who represented all that is holy and all that heals.

"Sarveṣāṁ maṅgalaṁ bhūyāt sarve santu nirāmayāḥ |"

Why is the Ass Śītalā Mascot ?

Sitala is seen sitting on ass. The word ass typifies all that is stubborn and stupid—a low level of evolution, which does not bring harmony and peace. Thus it is of little wonder that King Bali preferred to go to the Nether-World with only five scholars rather than ascend to heaven with as many as a hundred fools. The sage Chanyaka too saw nothing good in the ignorant. Why is it then that mother Sitala associates with this stupid donkey ? How will it help in her mission ?

Looked at from another angle—it is the ass that unprotestingly carries the load of sugar but does not taste of it. It is a quality—a sattwic attribute. To get Sitala's blessings we too must pour ourselves into serving humanity without tasting the fruits of the load we bear. That is exactly what Sitala and her mascot are doing. Who else can carry the heavy weight of human sufferings ? Here the ass is a symbol of the one who shoulders the burden.

The curse of pox is a great suffering—an extreme test of patience. The milk of the ass taken with other herbs has got great remedial value.* It also acts as a tonic to give strength to the mind. Be patient like the ass ; bear the pain of suffering and wait for the time to pass. There is nothing else to be done. Fix the mind on the glowing lotus of Mother Sitala's feet and force it away from all other worries. Where the three meet—medicines, nursing and god's grace, not only the pox but no other disease dares to linger. Even death hesitates to knock.

There is an opinion that according to ancient and pre-ancient Ayurvedic texts, the milk of the ass acts as a preventive cure for pox.

* Pandit Gaya Das says that drinking the milk of the ass at the inital stage prevents further eruption of boils. "*Ādau ye pivanti kharanādapayaḥ teṣāṁ bhavanti na kadācidapīha dehe śītalikā vikārāḥ* |" At the second stage it heals "*Sphoṭaiṣvapi sadāheṣu rāsabhasya kṣīraṁ hitaṁ*" |—*Sārasaṁgraha*. Yogaratnakar is of the same opinion.

"*Rāsabhasya payaḥ pītaṁ śītalājvaranāśanaṁ* | / *Stotrañca śītalādevyāḥ paṭhecchītalāmantike* ||" — *Yogaratnākara*.

According to Vaidyāmṛta.

"*Gardabhasya kṣīraṁ devi ! Yaḥ pivenmānavaḥ sadā* |/ *visphoṭakabhayaṁ ghoraṁ kule tasya na jāyate* ||" — *Vaidyāmṛta*.

Rajnirghantu opines that the urine of the ass has great medicinal value in the cure of diseases related to coughs, colds, convulsions etc. In the absence of mother's milk, new born infants can be administered the milk of the goat or of the ass, safely. "*Stanyābhāve payaśchāgaṁ gavyaṁ vā rāsabhaṁ Pivet* |"—*Bhaiṣajya Ratnāvalī*. This is the view of ancient Ayurvedic texts.

MANAṢĀ

Hymn to Manaṣā

Devīmamvāmahīnāṁ śaśadharavadanāṁ
cārukāntiṁ vadānyāṁ |
Haṁsāruḍāmudārāmaruṇitavasanāṁ sarvadāṁ sarvadaiva ||
Smerāsyāṁ maṇḍitāṇgīṁ kanakamaṇiganairmuktayā ca |
Prabālairvande'haṁ sāṣṭanāgāmurukucayugalāṁ
bhoginīṁ kāmarūpām ||

Oh Mother of the snakes, fair as the moon, unparalleled in beauty, astride the divine swan, generous, attired in scarlet, the fulfiller of boons, ever smiling, adorned with gold encrusted jewels of pearls and corals, encircled by the eight serpents, you are the one with glowing twin peaks of majestic breasts ; instantly can you take on any shape you so desire.

Meditation

Svetacampakawarṇābhāṁ ratnabhūṣaṇabhūṣitāṃ |
Vahniśuddhāṁ śukādhānāṁ nāgayajñopavītinīṁ ||
Mahājñanayutāñcaiva pravarāṁ jñānināṁ satām |
Siddhādhiṣṭhātṛdeviñca siddhāṁ siddhipradāṁ bhaje ||

She whose hue is as fair as the white champaka flower, who graces priceless jewels and fiery garments, who is as holy as the sacred flame, for whom the snake is the holy thread, whom the learned worship as Learning itself, we salute her, we bow to her, who is the giver of all boons.

Hymn

Jaratkārujagadgourī manasā siddhayoginī |
Vaiṣṇavī nāgabhaginī śaivi nāgeśvarī tathā ||

Jaratkārupriyāstīkamātā viṣaharīti ca |
Mahājñānayutā caiva sā devī vis'vapūjitā ||
Dvādaśaitāni nāmāni pūjākāle ca yaḥ paṭhet |
Tasya nāgabhayaṁ nāsti tasya vaṁśodbhavasya ca ||

Consort of Jaratkaru, divine Gouri, Manasa, Vaishnavi, Nagabhagini, Shaivi, Nageshwari, Jaratkarupriya, Astikamata, Vishahari, and Mahajnanyuta – these are the twelve names being addressed by which the devi is universally worshipped. During the hours of prayer whoever chants this garland of names, shall ever be free from the fear from the snake ; so too will be thus be protected their descendants.

The twelve names of Manaṣā

The sources of these names can be traced to the narrations in Brahmavarta Purana and Devi Bhagavat.

Once there was a thin emaciated sage called Jaratkaru. To him was married Manasa. Sri Krishna himself christened her as Jaratkaru. She is also known as jarat's lady love or Jaratpriya. Manasa is mother of Astika. Her Son Astika was a wise devotee of Lord Hari and the pride of his family. The extremely fair complexioned one, Manasa, charms heaven and earth. Hence she is known as Jagatgouri. For a thousand years Manasa meditated on Shiva to get divine wisdom and knowledge of Samaveda, and came to be as Lord Shiva's disciple or Shaivi. After Shiva initiated Manasa into the spirit of Krishna, she spent an era chanting Lord Vishnu's name and thence came to be known as Vaishnavi. The king of Yogins, Shiva, unravelled to her the mysteries of successful sadhana and thus Manasa is Siddhiyogini. She is also Nagabhagini because the serpent king Vasuki is her brother. Janmenjaya, in his famous Sarpa Sutra recounts how Manasa's son, displaying great skill, saved the lives of the snakes. From that day they were ever indebted to Nageswarī Manasa. She negates all the poison and brings back

life to the dead—so Manasa is Visahari. The knower of the Yoga, Manasa is eulogised as Mahagyanyukta.

Manaṣā In The Mahabharata

In the Mahabharata, Manasa known as Jaratkaru, is the beloved sister of the serpent king Vasuki. It was prophesised that her child would protect the snake dynasty. Hearing of this, Vasuki himself took great care of his sister and made plans for her marriage.

It so happened that one day an ascetic, Jaratkaru, came searching for the hand of a maiden. But he had three conditions – (1) the maid had to be named after him ; (2) after the marriage he would not take on the responsibility of his wife ; (3) if his spouse gave reason for him to be annoyed, he would immediately deny her and go away. Vasuki accepted these terms and gave his sister in marriage to this sage. Since childhood Jaratkaru had been a stern celibate and an uncompromising ascetic. This caused great distress to his ancestors who remained hanging upside down in an anguished purgatory. They cried out to Jaratkaru for a son of his to continue the line. To appease them, and not to satisfy his own petty desires, did Jaratkaru take unto himself a wife.

Vasuki's sister devoted her body and soul to her husband. So she came to be regarded as the ideal. Princess of the serpents, born and cradled in wealth, she ignored the yawning gulf between herself and her husband and completely identified herself with the ochre rags and matted locks of the ascetic who lived on fruits and roots. There was no regret in her – her husband was not even responsible for her. On the other hand she was always alert not to cause to her husband any discomfort. But fate had destined that the two were not to be joined together for long, for it was true that they had not come to be confined within the walls of mundane existence.

One day, after the mid-day meal, the rishi laid down his tired body, tortured with penances, to rest. Devi was at his feet, tend-

ing to his comforts. Meanwhile dusk had advanced. But the sage slept on. His wife fell into a dilemma. If she awakened him, his rest would be disturbed and he would get annoyed. But if the auspicious hour of twilight passed without him offering prayers, the rishi would stray from the righteous path. For sometime this indecision swayed her, but ultimately she decided it to be her duty to arouse her husband from his slumber. Slowly she awoke him – "Get up, my lord, the sun has nearly set. It is time to salute the dusk."

The call of the wife awakened him but he became solemn. "Devi, by breaking my rest you have earned my displeasure. The sun would never have dared to set until I awoke. Nevertheless I cannot stay here any long. I depart."

The news upset even Vasuki. But thinking of the welfare of his serpent clan he eagerly asked his sister – "Sister, what about the great hope I nurse in my heart ? Have you asked the sage about it ? It is your child that will save our dynasty." The sister replied – "Brother, I had asked the muni. He said – yes. My womb carries the seed of him who will save the Nagas." This child came to be named Astika or the Positive One. Janmejaya started the snake yajna to destroy all the Nagas. One by one, all the snakes were being killed off. At this critical juncture the fiery celebate Astika, tender and green in years, appeared at the yajna site of sacrifice and begged for alms. The king could not refuse and agreed to grant the request of this brahmacharin to stop this mass destruction of the serpents. That saved the clan from total annihilation.

In the Mahabharata, Manasa is depicted as the faithful, humble, devoted wife, the ideal woman and also the preserver of the race. In the Puranas we find her engaged in stern penances, as the realised disciple of Shiva and worshipper of Lord Hari. Blending the Mahabharata with the Puranas we get the total picture of an unparalled goddess– the epitome of grace and knowledge. Unfortunately in the hands of Bengal's bards,

Manasa has partially lost her divinity. Like Sitala, she too here becomes a fierce avengeful goddess.

Manaṣā in Mangalkavya

Kanahari Dutta, Ketaka Das, Kshemananda, Narayan Dutta, Vijayagupta and the names of few others may be mentioned amongst those who have written in Bengali on Manasa. There was a time when "Manasa-Mangal" and "Padma-Purana" written by them were household names in Bengal. The snake is renowed for it's cruelty. Keeping this trait in view they depicted Manasa's character, while potraying her infinite strength and compassion. By hook or by crook she wanted to reign in the heart of her devotees. And heavy is the price they had to pay for it. When innocent Chand fell from her favour, his seven vessels loaded with merchandise drowned in turbulent waters ; seven sons of this devotee of Mahamaya succumbed to the venom of poisonous snakes ; Behula, the pious daughter-in-law became a widow on her wedding night. But here it did not end. Chand, the reputed merchant, was reduced to beggary. Even these extreme tests could not weaken Chand's firm resolution. His determined character is brilliantly sketched in these tales of Mangalkavya. Especially the story of the virtuous Behula captures our hearts. Seeing all seven daughters-in-law cursed with widowhood, Chand relented. He agreed to worship Manasa but only with his left hand. Manasa had to be satisfied with that. With her grace, Chand was able to get back all that he had lost.

Our mind and *hearts* the goddess Manaṣā

The name Manasa is derived form the term manas or the *mind. In the Devibhagavat* or Brahmavaivarta Purana, it is depicted that the creator Brahma asked the great sage Kashyap to seek that particular branch of knowledge which would free mankind from the fear of snakes. There are three reasons behind

* Devibhagavat — 9.47

this name of Manasa. Firstly she is the product of Kashyap's mental meditations. Secondly, the mind is the playground of mankind ; thirdly it is here in the mind that secretly, by powers derived from practice, we come in contact with the Divine.

Mind is man's friend or foe—the reason for bondage or liberation. So says the scriptures. Where the mind is pure, concentrated, tuned towards spirituality and under control, it is the greatest friend and pathfinder to liberation. But where it is impure, fickle, slave to the senses and hostile to divinity, it is man's greatest enemy and the cause of all our misery. An adverse mind plunges us into the pit holes of suffering, poverty, danger, humiliation and even endangers our very lives. The stars must have played truant with Chand sadagar's fortunes. Chand was a master of his mind. The moon is a vaishya (trader) planet. In Manasa's Mangalkavya, Chand the merchant is the main hero. This point is to be noted. Many scholars have analysed the legend of Manasa and Chand Sadagar interpreting it from this angle of the mind and it's caprices.

The mind is the vessel that contains our feelings and intellegence. We shall later analyse this connection between Manasa and mental knowledge.

Manaṣā the antidote to poison

In the hymns Manasa is referred to as the panacea for poison. Generally we say that she takes away the venom of the snake, and her puja takes place in the monsoon month of Asarh – sometime between June and July. The incessant rains flood the land, forcing snakes to seek shelter in huts and homes. Many people are bitten and die. We can well imagine that in olden days when the forests and trees still held sway over the land there were many more snakes than what we have today. Protecting innocent people from snake-bites was at that time a matter of primary concern.

The sage Kashyap came forward to find a solution to this problem. The knowledge known as Mritasanjibani or that which resurrects the dead—is lost in antiquity. Today scientists are finding out other successful means to combat snake poisoning. Perhaps Kashyap's prescription for the scourge rested on the three — pillars the mental action of chanting mantras, taking of herbal medicines and physiotherapy of faith. Ancient India knew this great secret and had established Manasa as the symbol of this knowledge. The three fold action of mantra-chanting acting on the mind, of taking medicines and of undergoing physical treatment, coupled with Devi Manasa's grace, often diluted the venom to nought. Holy Bharatvarsha never initiated any stream of knowledge without acknowledging the force of the hidden spirit, the ruling deity behind it. In the field of learning related to snake poisoning, we hear the names of Nagmata, Nageswari, Nagbhagini, Nagyajnopabitini devi Manasa. The 8 snakes – Ananta, Vasuki, Padma, Mahapadma, Taksha, Kulir, Karkat and Sankhya are always there encircling the goddess. The serpents obey her commands. Thus, take her name and be free from the fear of the serpent.

The Yogic significane of Manaṣā being surrounded by snakes

There is a close connection between yoga and the snake. The naga or the serpent is a loner ; it is homeless, cautious, and is a cave-dweller. During winter it lives on nothing but air. At other times the snake eats what comes in front of it without any pre-planning. The yogi too displays similar characteristics. He builds no home, meditates inside mountain caves and takes whatever food is obtained without effort. By controlling breathing yogis can awaken the coiled serpent power. When awakened this kundalini shakti has the lightning speed of the snake. In the Puranas Manasa is referred to as Mahayogini. And the snake which is so alike the yogi finds pride of place with Manasa and also adorns her guru, Lord Shiva. In her is actually present Anima-yoga. She

is kamarupa and can take on any shape she so desires. The snake is thus the symbol of yoga.*

Manaṣā as the amalgamated symbol of knowledge, energy, faith and yoga.

We have already analysed that Manasa is the deity of the mind. It is this mind that helps us to sift the eternal from the non-eternal and ascend to the heights of knowledge. The tuned and trained mind is the receptacle of the potential energy lying latent and poised. Thus in Manasa, the goddess of the mind, we find both knowledge and energy. In her hymn it is said she wears scarlet garments and her complexion is as fair as the champak flower. In Devi Bhagavat she is Jagadgouri or the fair damsel of the universe and the one who charms us all. Red represents the force of energy and white stands for knowledge. She is the Yogini who arouses the coiled serpentine kundalini shakti. Her sacred thread of knowledge is the serpent and the devotees worship her as the Realised One. As the disciple of Shiva she is a stern ascetic shunning mundane pleasures, filling our lives with beatitude and grace. As a devotee of Vishnu, Manasa spreads the Message of devotion to sustain us. We have already narrated how she realised from Shiva, after observing hard penances at Kailesh, the eight worded mantra of Krishna. Armed with this she proceeded to Pushkar lake to pray to Vishnu for very many years. She had followed all the paths of realisations and so came to be known as 'Udara' or the Catholic-One. Free from all bigotry she guides the seeker no matter what the path. Hence she is Sarbada—or the One who is everywhere. Eternally conjoined with her inner Self, everlasting is her smile. Now the question is—what boon shall we ask from such a goddess ? Shall it be something more than just giving us relief from the dreaded snakebite ? Are not the fangs of our mundane existence

* Space at the end of Spinal Cord is described as Muladhar Chakra where the principal energy of all beings (Kulakundalini) dreams like a coiled serpent and wakes up by Jogic Sadhna.

more viscious in its bite ? Shall we not ask from her salvation from our earthly woes ?

In Devi Bhagavat the legend is that Lord Vishnu, satisfied with the penances of Manasa gave her this boon – ''May you be worshipped by all.'' After Krishna, the sage kashyap worshipped her. Thenceforth she became the idol of sages, men and serpents. All came to worship her. She never harasses anybody to get their obeisance. Should such a goddess be termed the Ferocious One ?

Why is the swan Manaṣā's mascot ?

Like Sarawati Manasa too is astride the swan which is the symbol of knowledge. Manasa's knowledge is limited to the territory of the mind. It is the mind that will lead us to the golden gates which open to a Supreme Knowledge which is beyond this mind. In passing it may be mentioned that in the case of ordinary knowledge we again come back to ourselves with the fruits of our penances. But in the case of Supreme knowledge which is eternal, there is no return ; no coming back to the confines of the mind.

Why is the swan Manasa's mascot ? The sadhak or seeker has to travel various stages of development and in this particular characteristic, a parallel can be drawn with the journey of the swan. The matter needs further explanation.

The paths are varied – that of knowledge, action, devotion or yoga. However all lead to realisation and Liberation. The condition of the mind varies at each stage. Here again a comparison can be drawn with the traits of the swan.

The saying goes that the swan can separate milk from water. Similarly the seeker during the initial stages, in trying to awaken the latent forces of the pure mind, learns to discriminate between the eternal and non-eternal. The yogin sees the eternal in the self, the devotee in god and the knower finds it in the Supreme Brahman or pure Consciousness. All else is transitory. The

water is never still. And yet the swan sieves out from it the white milk of truth. So too the yogin is ever connected with the eternal. The yogin controls the impulses of the senses, the knower meditates on pure consciousness and the devotee is one with the Lover through chanting of hymns and songs. In all cases the mind is yogaja and never cut off from the Eternal. Like the swan in the sky, seen from the earth the mind is apparently still, but with lightning speed it rises higher and higher towards realisation.

The Realised soul is in a state of equilibrium – unperturbed and calm. So too the swan with equal ease skims across water, strides the earth and penetrates the sky. The sage sees truth in all from the high priest to the lowly undertaker of the dead or the humble dog or cow. The wise one's vision is as wide and large as the limitless horizon of the flying swan.

Lastly, in the state of realisation the seeker remains untouched by the turmoil of existence. So too the waters cannot wet the feathers of the swan. The commonalities of greed, pleasure, pain, good, evil, desire, victory or defeat cannot soil the seeker of truth. To him the body is but a garment. He acts but is not the doer. He eats but only that much which makes his chariot move.

Does not the swan reflect the yogin's mind and should it not be the mascot of the goddess of the mind, Devi Manasa ?

CHAPTER XIV

SHIVA

Hymn to Shiva

Dhyāyennityaṁ maheśaṁ rajatagirinibhaṁ
cārucandrāvataṁsaṁ |
Ratnākalpojjvalāṅgaṁ paraśumṛgavarābhītihastaṁ prasannaṁ ||
Padmāsīnaṁ samantāt stutamamaraganaṇairvyāghrakṛttiṁ
vasānaṁ |
Viśvādyaṁ viśvavījaṁ nikhilabhayaharaṁ pañcavaktraṁ
trinetram ||

Meditate on Shiva who is as white as the silver mountains. The crescent moon adorns his forehead. His two left hands display the scimitar in one and the sign of the deer in another, while his two right hands bless and assure. Benevolent, attired in the skin of the tiger he is seated cross-legged in the posture of the lotus. On four sides the gods sing in his praise. He is the root and the cause of this universe. He alone dispels all fear. Each of his five faces is graced with three eyes.

The secret of Shiva's image in the hymn

In a comprehensive way the hymn encompasses all the distinctive features of Shiva. The Lord of the gods, the greatest yogin, the destroyer, the forgiver, the giver of boons, the primal cause of the universe and the preserver—all these aspects are covered in Shiva's hymn. The Vedas, Puranas and Tantra abound with references to Shiva. In them have been elaborated all that has been said in the hymn.

Is Shiva a Vedic God ?

Many are of opinion that Shiva was a non-Aryan deity. Consequently he was denied his share in Vedic offerings. That is

why Daksha never invited him to his yajna. Shiva plundered Daksha's yajna site and since then established himself in the Vedic pantheon. There might be some truth in this but it cannot be totally accepted. Shiva cannot be summarily dismissed from the Vedic scene. In Shiva-Purana, Shiva has been reinstalled as a Vedic god. This Purana narrates that the golden Being of the Chhandogya Upanishad, who is the centre of the universe, is actually the great Shiva.

In the Vedas the word Shiva is synonymous with Rudra. Vedic Rudra and Pauranic Shiva are one and the same. The many facets of Rudra are manifested in Shiva. For example in Yajurveda, Shiva is the one with the blue neck or the neck of the peacock. In Rigveda he is with the three eyes ; the matted one holding aloft the sword of lightning. The description of Rudra fits in neatly with Shiva. The sword of lightning of Rudra is later modified into the unbeatable Pasupat weapon of Shiva.

There are few other similarities. The easy flowing grace of Rudra is discernible in Pauranic Shiva. Rudra, like Shiva is fierce like an animal in his mood of destruction. Shiva is known as Vaidyanath, the divine doctor in Ayurveda. So too is Rudra the great god of medicine. In both the Rigveda and the Puranas Shiva's mascot is the bull and he holds aloft the bow and arrow.

Some points of the Vedic gods Pusha and Soma can be noticed in Pauranic Shiva. Pusha, like Shiva, has matted locks ; both are ancient—the wise old one ; both look after the cattle herd. In Vedas he is Anastapasu and in Puranas Pasupati ; both display sharp weapons. Another name for Shiva is Soma. Sporting the sign of the moon on his forehead Shiva is known as Somardhamouli or Chandramouli. The gentle moonbeams shower down on Shiva and so he is as fair as a silver mountain. Some scholars are of the view that hidden in the word 'soma' is the tantric secret force of Shiva and Shakti. He who is with Uma is Soma. Uma is Parvati and the Shakti of Tantra.

Shiva in the Puranas

In the Puranas Shiva holds a very high position. The depth of his character is eternal and timeless. In the Vishnu Purana it is stated that even Brahman and Vishnu both fail to realise the full significance of the Phallic-Shiva.

The Shiva Purana holds that all the alphabets from start to finish are Shiva incarnate. In other words Sound is Shiva. The fourteen vowels are his head, forehead, eyes, ears, brows, nose, lips, teeth and the pallette of his mouth. The consonants are the ten hands of his right and left sides, two feet, stomach, two sides, shoulders, heart, seven elemental stuff, navel and sound. This Shiva with the seven faces, ten arms and fair as camphor is the Yogin, who encaptures the heart of Brahma and Vishnu.

In the Shiva Purana the etymological meaning of the word Shiva has been analysed. It consists of 3 sounds—'she' means eternal bliss, 'i' stands for primal matter and 'ba' signifies primal eternal energy.

Śaṁ nitaṁ sukhamānandamikāraḥ puruṣaḥ smṛtaḥ ।
Vakāraḥ śaktiramṛtaṁ melanaṁ śiva ucyate ॥

—*Śiva Purāṇa*

It is also said in Shiva Purana that there are five facets to Maheswara. He is the one with upright matted locks ; fierce and illuminated like the sun and mellow and glowing like the moon, he is Kuber the Lord of wealth, and Brahman's pure consciousness. These comprise his five heads. Likewise, Shiva is engaged in various activities. He gambols, meditates, destroys, preserves and lastly encircles the entire universe.

The Lord of all, he is Ishan ; he is Bhagwan posessing six attributes ; revered by the devas he is Mahadeva the Great God ; He releases being or pasu from the shackles of their karma or cycle of cause and effect and therefore he is Pasupati ; with neither father nor mother he is only Himself, the one without a cause, without beginning, the Swayambhu ; all beings ask of

him wealth and glory and so he is Maheswar ; the largest and the all effulgent one he is also known as Brahman.

In the Vishnu Purana it is admitted that Shiva's abode, Shivaloka, is higher than Vishnuloka or even Brahmaloka. Although Shiva Purana's objective is to establish Shiva's prominence, a serious attempt has been made at synthesis. Shiva's devotees see in him all the other gods. Indra, Varuna, Yama, Kuber, Vishnu and other gods are but different manifestations of the various aspects of Shiva. Aindri is Indra, Dakshina is Yama engaged in destroying, Baruna turns to the west, Barada is Kuber in the north, Kapila is engaged in penance in the nether worlds and the sixth, Vaishnavi is Vishnu pointing upwards. That apart there is another image which is without any name or adjective—Pure Knowledge and the giver of Supreme Bliss for all.

The whole of Bharatvarsha—nay, the whole of the Universe is Shiva, Shiva and Shiva. The one Shiva reigns under various names. At Varanasi he is Mahadeva the great lord ; at Prayag Maheswar the supreme god ; at Naimeshkhetra Devdev, the God of gods ; at Gaya he is Prapitamaha our ancestor ; at Kurukshetra he is Kalesh the god of Time ; at Pravash he is Sashibhusan, the one who adorns the moon ; at Pushkar he is Ayogandha ; at Vimaleswar he is Viswa the universe ; at Attahasa he is Mahanad or the great Sound ; at Marukote he is Mahotkat the fantastic ; at Shankukarna he is Mahateja the great energy ; at Gokarna he is Mahabal the great strength ; at Rudrakoti he is Mahayogin the great mystic ; at Sthaleswar he is Mahalinga the great phallus ; at Avanti he is Mahakal the lord of Time ; at Madhyameswar he is Sarva ; at Kedar he is Ishandeva the lord of the North East ; at Himalaya he is Rudra the destroyer, the all consuming fire ; at Subarnaksha he is Sashasraksha of the thousand eyes ; at Vrisha he is Vrishadhaja astride the bull ; at Kankhal he is Ugra the extremist ; at Bhadrakarna lake he is Shiva the symbol of peace and bliss ; at Bhairav he is Bhairavakar the terrible ; at Bhadrapth he is Bhadra the gallant and polite one ; at Mangalbhand he is Kapardi the braided

haived ; at Kalajar he is Nilakantha the one with the blue neck ; the compassionate one who takes unto himself the poison of our selves ; at Kashmir he is Vijaya the victor ; at Devika he is Umapati the lord of goddess Uma, and at Purachandra he is Shankar the liberator. Why only on this terrestial plane ? In Satyaloka he is Brahmeswar the lord of eternal truth ; at Vaikuntha in the heavens he is Sadashiva the ever blissful. At Amaravati he is Amareswar the god of immortality ; in Varunalaya he is lord of the waters Varuneswar ; in Yamalaya he is Kaleswar the ruler of Time ; in Pabanalaya he is the god of the winds Pabaneswar and in the nether world he is Latkeswar. In Shiva Purana and Skanda Purana the list does not end here—it is longer. But for the sake of brevity all cannot be enumerated here.

Why is the worship of Shiva popular everywhere ? He is the greatest ascetic, renouncing trivials ; he is the ideal of the householder as well as the yogin devotee who is in search of knowledge and love. Shiva is the ideal truth for the state as well as society. Shiva symbolises Bharata's ethos and culture.

In Shiva Purana, Shiva's five faces have been analysed. Although the Mahabharata admits Shiva's multifaceted character, stress has been laid on mainly two traits. These two embrace Shiva's other aspects. He is at once the fierce destroyer as well as the symbol of everlasting peace and bliss. In fire, lightning and the sun we find expression of Shiva the fearful one as well as Shiva the preserver in the peace of the lakes and mellow mood of the moon. Half of Shiva is fire, while the other is the gentle moon. The Vedic Agni, god of fire, and Soma the moon-god both blend in Shiva. Shiva symbolises the power of the stern celibate and the ferocity of the destroyer.

His matted locks are smoky. He is Time—playing with the ages of the Universe ; he is the steady truth—the eternal one, Sthanu ; The gods are in him the Viswarupa ; the movable and immovable are all in him the Bahurupa, the one who takes on many forms ; holding aloft the trident he is Trishulpani ; he has

taken unto himself the poison and evils of ignorance and hence his neck is blue—Nilakantha ; he is the cause of liberation of all and so is known as Shankara. The destroyer of the demon Tripur (as narrated in the Shiva Purana) he is Tripurari.

The twelve illumined Phallic-Shivas—Jyotirlingams

The twelve illumined jyotirlingams dot a dozen pilgrim spots in India. At Saurashtra is Somnath ; in Andhra Pradesh by the banks of the Krishna on Srisaila hill is Mallikarjun ; at Ujjain by the river Sipra is Mahakal ; in Madhya Pradesh on Mandhata Parvat hill beside the holy Narmada is Parameswar. On the Himalayas, where flows the Mandakini, Shiva is Kedareswar ; on the north of Pune on the Sahayadri hills, by the Bhima river is Bhimshankar. Others opine that in Assam's Kamarupa district, Guwahati city is touched by the mighty river Brahmaputra. In the middle of the river, on Brahmapura hill reigns Shiva.

By the banks of the Ganga in Kashi is the abode of Viseswar; in Nasik, Madhya Pradesh, eighteen miles away from Panchavati grove, by the river Godavari is Trambakpuri where presides Trambakeswar, the lord with three eyes. In Bihar at Vaidyanath Dham is the jyotirlingam of Vaidyanath. Some revere the Lord Vaijonath near Maharashtra's Porlang station as another jyotirlingam. Near Aurangabad at Avarura village in Madhya Pradesh is Nageswar. About ten or twelve miles away from Dwaraka is Dwaruk grove. Here is Nageswar lingam. Ghusneswar or Ghusrineshwar is the presiding deity in the Maharastrian village of Berul. Take the name of these twelve jyotirlingams at the magic hour of dawn and find liberation from the evil weight of ignorance, accumulated through seven long births.

Shiva the Redeemer from time to time

Like Vishnu, Shiva the lord of Mount Kailash, descends from time to time to our terrestial world for the sake of mankind. In

Vayu, Brahmanda, Skanda, Kurma and other Puranas innumerable are the references to Shiva, as Guru. Among them prominent are the names of Sweta, Sutar, Daman, Suhotri, Kanka, Lokakshi, Jaigishavya, Rishava, Bhrigu, Atri, Bali, Gautam, Vedashira, Gokarna, Guhavasi, Shikhandi, Jatamali, Attahasa, Daruk, Langali, Shuli, Dandimundishwer, Sahishnu, Somasharma, Nakuli, Yogindra, Dadhibaha, Ugra, Mahayam, Tarana, Dharma, Bhindi, Muni, Pindamundiswar, Sangyami, Jundiswer, Kayaborohan etc.

In Saurya Purana it is foretold that Shiva would descend with his four main instructors. This was proved to be true. In 788 at Kerala's Chidambar village was born the famous Vedic commentator, Shankara. He is worshipped as the acknowledged incarnation of Shiva. In his endeavour to re-establish and propagate the Ancient Eternal Truth, he set up four monasteries at different points and appointed his four main disciples to run them. At Dwaraka's Sarada Math in the west presided Acharya Viswarup ; at Puri's Gobardhan Math in the East was Acharya Padmapada ; in the South at Rameswar's Sringeri Math was Acharya Prithviswar and in the north at Badridham's jyoshimath was Acharya Totak.

The celebrated founder of Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Acharya Srimat Swami Pranabanandaji Maharaj was born in the 19th century's ninety sixth year on of the full moon day in the winter month of Magh, at Bajitpur village in the district of Faridpur in East Bengal. His mother had dreamt that shiva himself had descended on her lap. Later in life this child manifested his greatness and blazed a trail of glory.

In Shiva a synthesis of contradictions

Previously it has been mentioned that Shiva is an enigma. His character and behaviour are contradictory. Is he an ascetic ? If so why does he sport weapons ? Is he a householder ? Then why does he haunt the cremation grounds ? A married man that he is, Shiva cannot be called a celibate. Nor is he a forest hermit

since he lives on the mountain Kailash. Not an expounder of the Vedas he cannot be a brahmin. Then is he a Kshatriya ? How so? Instead of looking after his subjects, Shiva is the supreme destroyer. Neither is he a vaishya for he deals not in trading and merchandise to acquire wealth. Then again, with the sacred thread of the serpent around his neck he is no servile sudra. Looking at his image of Ardhanariswar he is half a female and cannot be called a male. But a bearded Shiva cannot also be a female either. Separately no sign of the eunuch, boy, youth or the old man can be noticed in him. Is he holy ? But then why did overpowering anger make him decapitate the head of Brahman ? Then, is he a great sinner ? It cannot be said so because at the time of destruction he did away with the gods but no sin touched him. Nothing but the ashes of bones cover his bare nakedness, and so he is neither pure, clean or decent. Then who is He ?

King Daksha had likewise once become confused. He did not realise that as it is impossible to imagine a crocodile with fur, a rabbit with horns and a flower in the sky, so it is impossible to think of Shiva without the total principle of Shiva-hood, or of the pre–eminence of any other deity over and above Shiva.

Shiva humbles Daksha's pride

In the Puranas is narrated the conflict between Shiva and Daksha. It's a quarrel between the father-in-law and his daughter's husband. Daksha had given his daughter, Sati, in marriage to Shiva. Where the relationship is as sweet as honey why and when did this bitterness arise ?

In the Skanda Purana it is said that, once King Daksha was wandering about in the forest and came upon the hermitage of Naimisharanya. Here the sages gave to the king his due honour. At that holy pilgrim spot Shiva was also present. But Shiva did not arise and did not give Daksha the respect and recognition the king expected. Daksha was ignorant of Shiva's divinity and looked upon him only as his son-in-law. Daksha sneered at Shiva's pedigree, his association with black spirits of the nether

world and his stubborn egocentricity supposed insolence. The matter could have ended there, but Daksha announced that Shiva would be excommunicated from the yajna site. The family-quarrel snowballed into a caste war. Some scholars are of the opinion that in this episode is reflected the clash between the Aryans and non-Aryans. Already it has been mentioned that some viewed Shiva to be a non-Aryan god. At first he had no seat in the Aryan pantheon. It was the humiliation of Daksha and destruction of his yajna that paved the way for Shiva's establishment.

Let us come back to our narration. Wanting to avenge Shiva's insult, Daksha organised a magnificent yajna at Kankhal and invited all the gods and rishis, except his daughter Sati and her husband Shiva. This made Sati hurt to the core. To find out why her father had not invited them, Sati begged permission from her husband to go to her parent's home. But Shiva warned her—"Don't go uninvited. You will be asking for trouble and humiliation." But Sati's heart refused to accept this explanation. Does a daughter require an invitation to go to her father ? So, reluctantly Shiva had to agree to her wish.

With great warmth and hope in her heart Sati went to her parental home. But the irate Daksha was adamant. Not only did he refuse Sati entry, but he vociferously abused her husband hurting her delicate sentiments. Unable to bear it any longer the pious Sati gave up her life at the yajna site itself. Shiva is bliss and Sati is righteousness. One cannot stay without the other. Daksha was the ruler of his subjects, but he forfeited that right when he banished Truth and Grace. There was no spirit behind Daksha's actions and so the yajna became a meaningless hollow show of a petty ruler's inflated ego overshadowing purity and goodness. It was Daksha who took the non-Aryan path and abused the power given to him. He misused his skill or dakshata and it was therefore necessary to teach him a lesson. An infuriated Shiva, upon hearing of Sati's demise, tore out a lock from his matted hair. From it sprung up Virabhadra or the Gallant-One. This Virabhadra presided over the destruction of

Daksha's yajna. Daksha lost his life at his hands. The gods and sages who had participated in this yajna and had thus given silent assent to a work which excluded the benediction of Shiva, were specially humiliated. Brahma became a helpless spectator, and started to chant Shiva's praise. Slowly Shiva's anger subsided and his immortal gaze revived Daksha. But Daksha never got back the head he had lost. The head of a goat was fitted to his torso and with this goat's head he had to live out the rest of his rejuvenated life. Daksha's insolence had been decapitated and humbled he hung his head in shame. After giving Daksha invaluable advice Shiva left the yajna site.

Shiva mourning Sati

Brahma's eulogy and hymns cooled Shiva's fire of wrath but nothing could erase the pain of his memory of Sati. Shiva and Shakti like cause and effect, matter and energy, are forever entwined. Where there is Shiva, there is Shakti and vice versa. As water and its coolness and fire and its warmth cannot be seperated so too Shiva and Shakti are inseperable. The one without the other cannot be conceived of. Without his Sati, Shiva became as restless as the snake is without it's crown–jewel. The absent minded Shiva, furious and enraged began to dance the dance of destruction. The three worlds trembled as the end seemed to draw near. The peace in Shiva was there no more. What passion and love was there in the heart of Shiva the ideal householder ! Scorning comforts he had sought the cremation ground for his abode. Nothing could still his sorrow. But how can the worlds bear this loss of equilibrium ? This terrible insanity must be made to halt.

Sati, the symbol of righteousness was no more. But she must be revived. Where else will peace and bliss of Shiva take shelter? How can there be good without the strength of righteousness ? But who knew this secret ? Vishnu alone knew this for he is himself Knowledge—total Supreme Knowleldge. He came forward. The supreme preserver Vishnu, used his weapon of the

wheel or Chakra to relieve the burden of Sati's body on Shiva's shoulder. Her fifty two parts fell at different places and each spot became a pilgrimage, a tirtha. These pithas or centres are very holy to Aryan Hindus and unite India as one Bharatvarsha. The touch of Sati has sanctified, blessed and electrified this land with unparalleled spiritual force. The universal Mother, Sati, became reincarnated as Mother Bharata. Shiva and Shakti were ignored at Daksha's yajna. But the supreme Preserver Vishnu, spread the greatness of the conjoined force to the four corners. Humiliation of truth and beauty was avenged when fifty two centres propagating the Eternal Truth sprung up with rejuvenated force and strength. The re-establishment of spirituality calmed Shiva. Once more he sat down in meditation and harmony was restored. This is the significance of the legend of the fifty two pithas and the appeasement of Shiva's wrath.

The penance and marriage of Hara and Parvati

Lord Vishnu scattered fifty two corners of our terrestial plane with the holy remains of Sati. The Pure Consciousness of the Divine Mother mingled and became one with the earth. The earth became rejuvenated and afire with spirituality. No more did mankind have to look upto another heavenly plane for the grace of the Divine Mother. So, as a beloved daughter of our native earth she took birth as the child of the mountain king Himalaya and Meneka. She was given the name of Parvati.

Meanwhile Shiva, recovering from the shock of Sati's passing away, was engaged in stern meditation. There was no doubt that Shiva had withdrawn into a deep search to be reunited with his other half. Without asceticism and renunciation, strength or shakti can not be acquired. Like Shiva, Shakti too was afire with the passion to be united with him. One day a young Parvati, frolicking with her playmates glimpsed the great yogin Shiva meditating in a mountain cave. Immediately there aroused in her, her past impressions. Daughter of a king, the princess offered her heart and mind to the penniless mendicant. Her mother

Meneka as well as her friends tried hard to dissuade her. She should marry a prince of equal rank—rich and powerful. What is to be gained from marrying this poor yogin ? But Parvati's entire being was flooded with the thought of Shiva. Shiva has been hers from time immemorial, hers alone in innumerable past lives—how can she think of any other ?

Left with no other alternative Parvati's parents had to agree. With a tray of offerings, surrounded by her friends Parvati came to the great yogin. But the meditating Shiva covered with holy ash, illumined him with a light that made the mountain tops as well as Devi's third eye, a glow, remained unaware and indifferent. Parvati was waiting. But who could interrupt the yogin's meditation ?

The gods saw this was the opportune moment. If Hara and Parvati did not unite then Kumar, the slayer of the demon Tarak, would not be born and the suffering of the gods would not come to an end. The strategy had been pre-planned and the god of love, Kama-deva was ready at hand with his cupid's bow and arrow. Right at the auspicious moment, when Parvati was poised to garland her beloved, Kandarpa Kama let loose his arrow to stir the heart of the great yogin. The arrow found it's mark. For the fraction of a second Mahadeva lost his self-control. His calm interior began to vibrate. Searching for it's cause Shiva saw Kamadeva standing not afar, armed with his bow and arrow. Kamadeva had broken Shiva's concentration. Shiva's anger arose. Fire shot out of his third eye and burnt the unfortunate god to ashes. How effective can be the puny arrow of Kandarpa against Shiva who had swallowed with impunity the venomous poison that had come out of the churning of the ocean ? The temporary disturbance in Shiva's breast disappeared into it's own momentariness. The yogin's meditating force had engulfed the petty god. Once more Shiva returned to his depths. Parvati surrendered to this defeat for the time being and turned back.

But the incident had been very educative to her. She realised that the mundane path could never help her to scale divine

heights. Only the spirit will connect with the spirit. So she decided—she too would be a yogini and take the path of meditation and penance. With her parents consent she started on a hard course. When stern disciplines purified Parvati to her very depths, she felt Shivahood flowing through her entire being. Then and then alone Shankar let himself be captured by his Shankari. Shiva and Shakti were once again reunited. King Himalaya, observing all the social norms, gave his daughter to Shiva in marriage. The sacred union of the two yogins brought about the birth of Kartikeya, the slayer of the demon Tarakasur. Kartikeya's story will be recounted later on.

The legend of Hara-Parvati is extremely significant. On the question-answer session of Shiva-Parvati is based Bharat's Tantra philosophy. Answering Parvati's queries Shiva had laid down the disciplines for the four castes, householders, hermits and for the women. The fruits of works and liberation were also discussed. The relationship of Shiva-Parvati is an ideal for all householders. This life is not for crass enjoyment but is for yoga to connect us to righteousness, truth and knowledge. This is to be learnt from the divine couple Shiva and Shivani.

Why is Shiva's neck blue

Hitherto we have discussed that the Vedic god Rudra with his peacock-neck is the same as the blue necked Nilakantha Shiva of the Puranas. There is a heart warming story in the Puranas narrating why his neck became blue. The gods and demons were churning the ocean. In the process, an all devouring destructive poison came out from the depths of the waters. To preserve and save creation Shiva had drunk this venom and consequently his neck became blue. Since then Shiva has been known as the one with the blue neck—Nilakantha. The story needs some elaboration.

Once the gods and demons seeking the nectar of immortality, forgot their contradictions and joined together to churn it out of the ocean. Vasuki, the king of snakes, was the rope and Mandar

mountain was the pole for the churning. Like the Ramayana this extraordinary feat went on and on for thousands of years. Ultimately a time came when the tired Vasuki began to vomit poison. The scourge of its venom spread through the entire earth. Both the gods and demons became full of fear. Helpless the gods turned to the selfless absent minded Shiva for help. Narayan prayed—"Oh Mahesh, you are the greatest amongst the gods. Thus who else but you have the first right to claim what comes out of the churning ?" Keeping in view the request of the supreme preserver of this universe, Vishnu, and on seeing the plight of the gods, without a murmur, the God of gods, Mahadeva drank the poison. Once more the churning resumed. One by one emerged beautiful angels, Varuni, the great horse Ucchasroba, the jewel Kaustav and lastly came out the nectar of immortality—Amrita. Immediately a murderous war broke out between the gods and demons. Vishnu took on the form of a charming woman, Mohini, deluded the demons and made off with the nectar for the gods. Those asuras who managed however to follow Vishnu (disguised as Mohini), also perished.

In the Matsya Purana this same story is recounted in a slightly altered form. Here the legend goes that the poison named Kalkuta emerged from the ocean and challenged the devas and asuras either to swallow him or to be devoured by him. Both the gods and demons were after nectar. It was for this nectar alone that they had set upon this enterprise and not for partaking poison. Neither did they have the strength to take it. Its toxicity darkened Vishnu's complexion and some of the gods fainted while others died. Doomsday seemed to approach as Death personified as Kalkuta marched on relentlessly engulfing creation. When none came forward to help,when none had the power to do so, then the king of yogins, God of gods, Mahadeva, stepped forward voluntarily to check the devastation. With cupped hands he drank up the dreaded poison. The three worlds remembered this great benevolent act of Shiva with awe and reverence. Which other god has ever in like manner risked personal danger for the good of all ? This aspect of Shiva's character is unparal-

leled. In the entire Pauranic lore there is no second example of such an illustration. Moreover it can be said that even today Shiva is continously absorbing all that pollutes. In some form or other the conflict between good and evil continues and is eternal. It encompasses both our inner and outer existence without a break. And is it not polluting the world with it's toxic intensity ? That we are not scalded and burnt is because of Shiva's grace. Behind the scenes, Shiva is quitely bearing the burden of the cross.

Shiva as Bhutnath the lord of all beings

Another name of Shiva is Bhutnath. Bhuta means being. All those with life are his subjects and so he is Bhutnath or Bhutapaban. He is the saviour of life. To him there is no difference between the high and low. He loves everybody and has compassion for all and sundry. He specially loves the downtrodden and outcast. The slightest show of devotion evokes a warm response from him. He grants their boons. Who else is more generous than him ? What severe penance could not achieve, three ordinary hunters name Chandak, Rurudruha and Sunder Sen got easily from Shiva. He did not deprive them because of their lowly status. A recount of the legends will not be out of place here.

Singhaketu was the son of the king of Panchala. Once he went hunting with his family and entered the deep forest. Amongst others with him was a servant named Chandak who belonged to the Savar tribal community. Wandering in the forest Chandak picked up a beautiful Shiva-linga from a deseted temple. It made Chandak very happy. Taking it to the prince he said—"My lord, look at the Shiva-linga I have found. I shall worship it. Tell me the rules and rituals." Smiling at Chandak's simplicity Singhaketu teased him—"Wash it with fresh water, sit on a clean mat, light incense sticks and a lamp using forest leaves and wildflowers for your puja. You must dance and sing to music, offer food and partake of it. What else ? These are the

rules for puja. Oh yes—one more thing—don't forget the holy ash from the cremation ground. This ash pleases Shiva greatly." Chandak did not realise that the prince was sarcastically joking. In simple trust he sat down with his wife to worship Shiva.

One day Chandak found that ash from the holy cremation ground was not there, and neither could it be found anywhere. His wife promptly came forward and said—"We have lived long enough in this ramshackle hut. Let me set it afire and burn my body. Then you will have the holy ash." Sarvari did as she told. At the time of entering the fire she joined her palms in reverence, meditated on Shiva in her heart and offered herself. "My Lord, I want neither wealth, fame nor the heavens. All I want is shelter at your glowing feet. Let my senses be the flowers, my body the incense and my heart the lamp for your worship. Let my life be the cream of offering and let mankind benefit from the fruits of this puja."

Chandak offered his wife's ashes to Shiva but on turning around he found her and their hut as before. Chandak became speechless with surprise. Meanwhile a divine chariot descended from Shivaloka. What yogins by severe penance could not achieve, this simple hunter and his wife could get. They ascended to heaven in their mortal bodies to be near Shiva. (Skanda Purana 7th Adhaya)

Vilvapatrāt paraṁ nāsti yena tuṣyati śaṅkaraḥ।
—Śiva Purāṇa

Chandak and his wife knew not the intricacies of formal worhsip. But this loss was compensated by their determined renunciation and fiery devotion. In the Shiva Purana is narrated another incident about Ruruduhu a dark stocky fierce hunter, who knew nothing either about devotion or worship. Accidentally, on the holy night of Shivaratri, unknowingly he happened to place some leaves of the wood-apple tree on a Shiva linga. This won for him a place in Shivaloka when he died. In Garura Purana there is the story of Sundar Sen, the king of the tribal

hunters known as Nishada. He too had unknowingly placed leaves and poured water on a Shiva linga. It is easy to please Shiva. Satisfied with this little bit, Shiva granted to Sunder Sen the boon of liberation. Vedanidhi was a brahmin who was a thief and fond of women. But on the night of Shivaratri, it so happened by chance that he was on fast when he placed leaves and poured water on the Shiva linga. Shiva instantly became pleased. The messengers of Yama could not touch the body of Vedanidhi when he died. Thus Shiva is loved by all for his large hearted spontaneous catholicity. Even the enemies of gods, the demons too revere Mahadeva. He has no enemies. The Lord of the demons, Ravan had enslaved all the gods but his supreme deity was Shiva. The demon Narakasur was Krishna's sworn enemy but he was also a devotee of Shiva.

No caste or creed is barred from worshipping Shiva. The rituals are affordably simple—there is hardly any extravagance. Before offering Ganga water and leaves of the wood apple (bel) tree chant "Bom ! Bom !" with joined palms. The eternal giver of boons, Shiva, will be satisfied.

Shiva's Mrigamudra

As per Sanskrit grammar, the word mriga means 'to-search'. Shiva is seated in mrigamudra. Like the hunter does he too seek the deer ? It is not so. Shiva is searching for his own devotees to express his love for them. Usually we know that it is the bhakta or the devotee who pines for his Lord. But in the case of Shiva it is the reverse. Here the Shiva devotees are at an advantage for their god hunts them out. The bhakta might forget him but Shiva remembers. He hunts them out and takes his bhaktas unto himself. The seeker might well say—who else is more compassionate than the benign Shiva ?

Kapali Shiva

Here Kapali means the SKVLL. The supreme ascetic uses this kapala as his begging bowl. It symbolises renunciation.

Shiva the spouse of Parvati, has chosen the cremation ground for his abode. And hence in his hands he holds the skeleton's forehead.

The commentators of the Puranas are not willing to accept this explanation. To them the forehead is that of Brahma. Once there was a hierarchical dispute between Brahma and Shiva. An enraged Shiva used his nails to claw out one of Brahma's head. But by doing so Shiva had to face a risk. The forehead stuck fast to Shiv's hand. It could not be dislodged. In the end Shiva could free himself only after bathing in the Kapalamochan ghat of the Ganga at Varanasi. Absolved from the sin of killing Brahma, Shiva could at last rid his hand from the skull.

Brahma creates while Shiva destroys. Apparently there is a contradiction between creation and destruction and it is a matter of debate as to how to decide in whose favour the scales are tipped. Keeping this point in view the Pauranic commentators wanted to arrive at a solution. But if this was the root cause of the quarrel then the solution is not really satisfactory. Behind the apparent conflict is a deep harmony. The old must fade and has to be exterminated to allow the new to bloom. Thus creation and destruction are not contradictory but complementary. However some Puranas have taken this opportunity to play up Shiva's prominence.

Natraj Shiva

The dance of Shiva mourning Sati has already been mentioned. Insane with grief Shiva had broken into such a rhythm of destruction that creation trembled. In the rudra-tal of the classical dance form, this finds expression. But there is a note of harmony also which soothes and calms. The dance is his mood and the vibrating sound is Shiva's form. The steps of "dam ru ru di dim di dim" matching the vocal "babam, babam" combine to echo Brahmasangeet which spontaneously burst forth into the exquisite classical dance. Dance, song and music—these three arts comprise of the drama. It is said Shiva is the original ex-

ponent of the art of dancing. Brahma was the first to hear from him these five vedas. Brahma retold it to Bharat and Bharat spread the art on this earth. Bharat Muni's "Natya Sashtra" is the cream of India's treatise on this discipline.

In the Skandapurana it is mentioned that for four months Shiva danced. It spanned the monsoon months and extended without a break upto autumn. All the gods were present, and so were the sages, seekers, yakshas, spirits, sadhyas and vasus. The six Ragas and 36 Raginis too were present. At this concert Brahma accompanied on the mridangam, Indra played on the flute and Keshava kept the rhythm. Agni the god of fire, Aswini Kumar the twin gods of medicine, Chandra the moon god and Surya the sun god were not idle either—they all participated. The various instruments called panab, upanga, surpa and the bell vibrated to match the steps of the enraged Shiva. The celestial gandharvas tuned in their voices to match the mood. The glowing illumined Shiva covered with holy ash, sported a crown of snakes on his head. It was indeed a captivating, fascinating, spellbinding divine spectacle.

In the art of music too Shiva is the King. Listening to Shiva's rendering of music, Vishnu's heart flowed over, and from his feet issued forth the holy river Ganga which Brahma captured in his jar, the kamandalu.

Shiva the destroyer

We have already dwelt at length on the peaceful Shiva, the yogin Shiva, the blissful Shiva and Shiva the lover of all beings. That apart he is known as the destroyer. We have touched on that aspect too. Shiva manifests himself as the exterminator at the hour of doom.

There are four types of destruction—daily toll of life, destruction at the end of each era, natural decay into the five elements and the cessation of ignorance. It is to be noted that Shiva's destruction is never a total eclipse of the self. The darkness of ignorance is ruthlessly cut asunder allowing light to

emerge. Shiva cannot be understood without keeping in view the greatness of this deep inner significance of his character. Man is born today to die tomorrow. But each death precedes a new birth with a fresh beginning. Once more the slate is clean to write on with the impressions of the last lesson. The wheel keeps moving forward. There is this progressive rhythm in Shiva's dance of death.

Apart from this, Shiva's path of extermination follows another pattern. First Daksha's yajna followed by the slaying of the demons Tripurasur, Dundubh, Jallandhar etc. Time and again Shiva took up his weapon to eradicate the last traces of evil, oppression, sin, perversion and ill omens., for the sake of ultimate peace, prosperity and protection of creation.

The Trishul of Shiva

Shiva is identified by the trishul gracing his divine hand. What does this weapon signify ?

The trishul is not just an ordinary piece of arms, it is the key to Shiva's treasure chest. There are priceless principles of supreme knowledge called tattvas, in Shiva's jewel casket. And the trishul alone can unlock this secret vault. The tattvas start from the mundane level of qualities and go, beyond the adjectives, beyond the transcending mind to another plane. The trishul with it's trident fork stand for the three qualities of satya, rajas and tamas or goodness of truth, activity and inertia. The three branches of the weapon rest however on one straight rod which represents that which is beyond all qualities. The prongs of the trishul may also be taken to represent creation, preservation and destruction. Satya is Vishnu, Rajas is Brahma and Rudra is tamas. The trishul is these three in one. Shiva the exterminator is also in a sense the creator and preserver. In him harmonise all three principles, for Vishnu and Brahma support and complement Shiva. What is involved in one, evolves and branches into three. The one that is unmanifest finds expression

in myriad manifestations. It is the key to the mystery of being and becoming.

Rajaḥ sattvaṁ tamaścaitatr̥śūlaṁ tr̥guṇātmikam |
Tasaiva śivakoṣasya kuñcikā kathikā Budhaiḥ ||

All of life seeks Shivahood. But the three qualities or gunas, enslave with three strong knots. Braham's string is that of activity ; Vishnu ties with goodness and Rudra presses down with the dragging weight of inertia. But the trishul can at one stroke cut the gordian knot and free mankind when the locks on the main gates of Shivaloka fall apart. This trishul is of special import in the secrets of Tantra practice.

Shiva in Tantra philosophy

In Tantra Shiva is worshipped in the sixth corner of a cup made from three leaves. A golden Shiva is seated in a pose of beatitude, as the giver of boons and as the hunter seeking out his devotees. The six parts of Shiva with the five faces are knowledge, satisfaction, beginningless, individuality, destruction and eternity. A smiling Shiva is seated between two lotus flowers. The moon adorns his crown and from the moon drips nectar cascading over his divine body.

In Tantra philosophy the ultimate goal is to attain Shivahood. For this however help has to be taken from Shakti. Shiva is without any guna—Niranjan. But Shakti is the personification of the three gunas.

Shakti, as the coiled potential power of the serpent. rests at the bottom of the spine—the muladhar chakra. When she awakens the seeker attains realisation. The aroused kundalini of the snake has the tendency to move upward to met her Lord Shiva. This is the ultimate goal. En route she takes the seeker or sadhak through various experiences. There are six points of chakras in the body and corresponding to each is a principle. The chakras—Muladhar, Swadhistan, Manipur, Anahata, Visuddha and Agya stand for the principles of earth, ether, fire, wind,

space and knowledge respectively. Each chakra is a rung on the ladder of progress. Shakti takes the seeker upwards step by step, pausing at each stage to impress upon the sadhak the lessons one by one. Thus with Shakti's help the sadhak gradually ascends from the gross to the subtle. The personality in the person can ascend upto the Agya chakra. Here is the entry point into Shivaloka. Penetrating it, Shakti enters the domain of the blooming thousand petals to unite with Shiva. To reach this ultimate stage there are six chakras but three points or knots. The first is the Muladhar Chakra. This is the rajas of tamasic Rudra's Agya chakra. The three gods jealously guard the three gates and without their grace entry is imposible. But to make them do so a price is to be paid—their knowledge has to be absorbed at each stage. In this way the seeker transcends the chains of the gunas.

Scholars and sages realised the significance of the trident in overcoming the three gunas. The founder of Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Shiva's incarnation Srimat Swami Pranabananda Maharaj himself took up the trident as his mascot. He propounded the festival of Trishul which was previously little known. Today it is celebrated all over the world with great enthusiasm. The devotees of Shiva have to hold aloft the trident. With it's help the animal in man will be crushed and Shivahood established. This is the driving force behind the Trishul festival. (Sangha's publication—"Sri Sri Trishul Tattva and Trishul Utsav.")

The bull of Shiva

We have seen that Vedic Rudra and Pauranic Shiva are not much different—Shiva is Rudra and Rudra is Shiva. In the Rig Veda, Shiva is referred to as Vrishava and in the Puranas Vrishava or the bull is Shiva's riding animal—his mascot or vahana. Generally we speak of vrishava as the one which enhances strength. In the Rigveda Shiva is referred to as Vrishava and in the Purana the Vrishava is his vahana. Both the strength and serenity of Shiva is reflected in the Vrisha. When enraged the

bull is a picture of ferocity and destruction. But otherwise it is a harmless symbol of peace—docile and dedicated to selfless service in cultivation and transport ; man's constant companion and his benefactor in many ways. Thus rightly is the bull the vahana of Shiva.

The word vrishava connotes strength and potency. In cultivation and for purposes of transport the bull is indispensible. That apart a single bull has the capacity to fertilise many cows. The bull satisfies and pleases many. Similarly Ashutosh Shiva is forever eager to respond to his devotees for their well being. In this sense too the vrisha is an apt carrier of Shiva. The broad shoulders of the animal speak of strength and power. In another sense the word vrisha means the greatest. Shankar is the God of gods, the most powerful one and the symbol of potency. It is but natural that he should choose the bull to be his mascot.

Since when do we find this concept ? In the Mahabharata there is a legend which may be briefly narrated. The doomed subjects of Daksha turned to their king for succour. Daksha who had tasted of the immortal nectar, keeping the welfare of his people in mind, belched. And from that belch came out Suravi the divine cow. Suravi produced Kapila and other cows of the herd. Kapila's milk sustained mankind.

One day the Kapilas were suckling and frothing milk. This froth happened to fall on Shiva's head. Irritated an angered Shiva turned his gaze on the Kapilas and under his fiery gaze the Kapilas began to change colour. Seeing Shiva enraged, Daksha began to chant the praises of the herd. He said—"Oh Shiva, you should not be angry. The Kapilas are very holy. Do not take the froth from their mouth as anything stale or impure. Look at them—they sustain the householders of the world with their milk and cream. Therefore Oh Shiva, withdraw your anger." To appease the infuriated Shiva, Daksha presented him with a bull and some cows. Immediately Mahadeva became very happy. He made the bull his mascot and symbol. In this way, in the Rig

Veda he who was only Vrishava, in the Mahabharata became He for whom the bull is a carrier and flag.

In the Vrihadharma Purana this story is told in a different way. It is said that Daksha arranged a gathering called Swayambhar Sabha for his daughter Sati to choose her husband. But in her heart of hearts Sati had already garlanded Maheswar as her husband. At the sabha, seeing that Shiva was absent at the august gathering, she chanted "Namah Shiva" and threw the garland meant for the groom on the floor with a secret prayer to the God of gods, Mahadeva, to accept it. Penetrating the floor Shiva appeared from the ground, accepted the garland and immediately disappeared.

Sometime later Shiva again appeared at Daksha's palace to see Sati. This time he had come disguised as an old brahmin. Teasing Ratnamukhi, a friend of Sati, he said—"What a shame ! Shiva took the garland but did not come to marry Sati. If you don't have any objection let me accept Daksha's daughter as my wife." Hearing this Ratnamukhi became scarlet with anger. Infuriated she thundered—"Get out !" But Nilakuntala, another friend, cautioned Ratnamukhi—"Do not say that, for I think, Sada Shiva, the Eternal One has come to accept Sati." This made Ratnamukhi even more angry—" You are as dumb and devoted to Shiva as is his bull. You should have been a bull !" The reply made Nilakuntala happy." That will be wonderful for then I shall be able to enjoy the company of Shiva uninterrupted." As she spoke Nilakuntala became a bull and Shiva too took up his own form and mounted the vrishava and thus granted his devotee's wish.

It should be said that this was not the first legend about the vrishava of Shiva. When this incident took place the bull Nandi was already there serving Shiva. The story of Nilakuntala is an illustration of how Shiva fulfills the desire of his devotees. It is the ultimate wish of the seeker to serve his god. The angry face of Ratnamukhi could not cast any doubts on the resolute faith of the devotee Nilakuntala. As a result she remained immortal, constantly in attendance on Shiva, faithfully serving him.

CHAPTER XV

DURGĀ

Hymn

Om jaṭājutasamāyuktāmarddhendukṛta śekharāṁ |
Locanatrayasaṁyuktāṁ pūrṇendusadṛśānanāṁ ||
Atasīpuṣpavarṇābhāṁ supratiṣṭhāṁ sulocanāṁ |
Navayauvanasampannāṁ sarvābharaṇabhūṣitāṁ ||
Sucārudaśanāṁ tadvat pīnonnatapayodharāṁ |
Tribhaṅgasthānasaṁsthānāṁ mahiṣāsuramardinīṁ ||
Mṛṇālāyatasaṁspaṛśa – daśavāhusamanvitāṁ |
Tṛśūlaṁ dakṛṣiṇe dhyeyaṁ khaḍgaṁ cakraṁ kramādadhaḥ ||
Tīkṣṇavāṇaṁ tathā śaktiṁ dakṣiṇeṣu vicintayet |
Kheṭakaṁ pūrṇacāpañca pāśamaṅkuśameva ca ||
Ghaṇṭāṁ vā paraṁśu vāpi vāmataḥ sanniveśayet |
Adhastānmahiṣaṁ tadvadviśiraskaṁ pradarśayet ||
Śiraśchedodbhavaṁ tadvaddānavaṁ khaḍgapāṇinaṁ |
Hṛdi śulena nirbhinnaṁ nirṣadantravibhūṣitaṁ |
Raktāraktīkṛtāṅgañca raktavisfuritekṣaṇaṁ |
Veṣṭitaṁ nāgapāśena bhṛkutībhīṣaṇānanaṁ ||
Sapāśavāmahastena dhṛtakeśañca durgayā |
Vamadrudhiravaktrañca devyāḥ siṁhaṁ pradarśayet ||
Devyāstu dakṣiṇaṁ pādaṁ samaṁ siṁhopari sthitaṁ |
Kiñcidūradhaṁ tathā vāmamaṅguṣṭhaṁ mahiṣopari ||
Prasannavadanāṁ devīṁ sarvakāmaphalapradāṁ |
Stuyamānañca tadrūpamamaraiḥ sanniveśayet ||
Ugracaṇḍā pracaṇḍā ca caṇḍogrā caṇḍanāyikā |
Caṇḍā caṇḍavatī caiva caṇḍarūpāticaṇḍikā ||
Aṣṭābhiḥ śaktibhistābhiḥ satataṁ pariveṣṭitāṁ |
Cintayejjagatāṁ dhātrīṁ dharmakāmārthamokṣadāṁ ||

Durgā as she appeared to sages in their meditations

Devi Durga with her shock of cascading tresses – the crescent moon is her tiara, her body is as beautiful as the full moon and her complexion is of the golden hue of the Atasi flower. Es-

tablished in the three worlds, at the peak of youth, adorned with all the ornaments, her visage is exquisite and the twin peaks of her breasts are round and voluptuous. Her left knee, waist and neck – these three points are at an angle. The demon Mahisasura is at her feet and her ten arms are like the petals of the lotus. In her five right arms she holds aloft in ascending order – the weapons trishul, kharga, chakra, sharp arrow and shakti. The left arms hold in similar sequence khetak, stringed bow, pasha, ankush, bell and parasu. At her feet is the headless bison and from its decapitated neck is coming out a demon brandishing a sword. The spear flung by Devi has penetrated his heart. As a result the fiery eyed asura is scratched and bleeding. With a serene indifference Devi is hauling him up by the hair on his head. Encircled by the snakes on her hands, Mahisasura is vomiting blood and his brow is fiercely arched in pain. Durga's right leg is placed straight on the lion and the tip of her left toe is arched over the demon's shoulder. She is surrounded by the eight female shaktis – Ugrachanda, Prachanda, Chandogra, Chandanayika, Chanda, Chandavati, Chandrupa and Atichandi. Mother of this universe, she grants the four boons of religion, wealth, desire and liberation.

The majestic divine image appeared to sadhakas in their meditation. Lakshmi and Ganesha are to her right and Saraswati and Kartick grace her left. This is her complete image as is worshipped during autumn in Bengal.

The concept of Devi in Rig Veda

Devi Shukta and Ratri Shukta are Vedic hymns. In the former the goddess herself expounds her own limitless infinite greatness to the Rishi Ambhrina through his daughter Vac. The Ratri Shukta is a hymn addressed to her.

In Devi Shukta the deity is Vac. She is omniscient, all powerful ubiquitous creator of all. She pervades as the eleven Rudras, the Vasus are she and in her is contained Vishnu and the other Adityas. She is the universal goddess epitomising all the other

deities. Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Agni, the twins – Aswinikumars, Soma the destroyer, Tushta, Pusha, Bhaga etc. are all in her. She rules the entire universe. The granter of boons and the all seeing seer, she is the object of worship for all sadhakas ; she in all forms and shapes as the primal original energy. In all, it is she who eats. In all, it is she who sees. It is she who can grant Liberation and Realisation. It is entirely her will and grace. With whose strength had Rudra vanquished his enemies ? Devi had given Rudra the strength to arch his bow. She penetrates earth and heaven. It is for the good that she takes on the mantle of warfare and destruction. In her womb she carries both the worlds. Having created it, she flows freely through it like the wind. Herself unattached, serene, involved, pure consciousness itself, she, by her own will resides in the hearts of all.

In the Ratri shukta of Rig Veda, Devi is the sky and space, daughter of Paratma or the virgin primal force. She is omniscient and all pervading. She is devi or manifest in all. The Ratri shukta, applicable to the starlit restful night, also refers to the liberating illuminating spiritual knowledge that lights up the darkness of ignorance. The renowned Vedic commentator Sayanacharya has given this spiritual interpretation. Ratri devi is the third eye which presides over her own creation of the five elements which sprung out from her ownself. She overlooks the welfare of all. She is eternal. Starting from dumb matter and the humble weed, the entire universe is contained in the web of her consciousness. It is she who destroys the darkness of ignorance. After dusk the birds surrender to the safety of the trees. So also do we find shelter in our homes merging into the omniscient consciousness of the Goddess of Night. Man, animal and birds – all rest in her arms at night. She protects us from the tigers of lust and greed that maul and attack. To us she is like the milch cow. Responding to our cries she suckles, nourishes and immunises us against everything evil.

Etymologically the word (ratri) means – granter of boons. In Devi Purana she is that in which everything dissolves – she is Brahma's Maya Shakti. In Sri Sri Chandi, hymns are addressed

to her as Kalratri – the Night of Eternity ; Maharatri the Great Night and Moharatri, the Night of Enchantment.

The Concept of the Devi in the Puraṇas

In Markendeya Purana's Sri Sri Chandi, the goddess herself says – "In this universe I alone reign. Other than me who else is there ?" This Advaita principle is the basis for the philosophy underlying Vedic, Pauranic and Tantric ideals. Lakshmi, Saraswati, Jagadhatri, Uma, Parvati, Bharati, Ambika, Kali, Chandi, Maheshwari, Barahi, Kaumari, Bhagawati, Gouri, Brahmani, Katyani, Chamunda etc. are but different names and forms for the one great goddess. Kali, Tara, Shoroshi, Bhubeneswari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagala and others are the ten different manifestations of the one. Sometimes she has two arms but at other times four, eight, twelve or even eighteen arms. In one passage of the Chandi she is worshipped as the one with one thousand arms. Varied are her images – uncovered and naked like the sky or richly attired, her complexion takes on various hues – black, blue, yellow, ash or fair. Mahakali, Mahalakshmi or Mahasaraswati symbolise the constituents of tamas, rajas and satya respectively. Manasa, Sitala, Sashti, Gandheswari, Subachani and Annapurna are all parts of the one Mother Nature. Indian Philosophy has its roots deeply entrenched in the concept of the divine primal female energy.

The Devi in Sri Sri Candī

The concept of Devihood is fully analysed in Sri Sri Chandi which is a part of Markendeya Purana. In this treatise three divisions have been made. The first is concerned with the slaying of the demons Madhu and Kaitav ; the second with the destruction of Mahisasura and in the third part Sumbha and Nisumbha are exterminated.

At the end of an era Vishnu or Lord Hari is in deep slumber – yoganidra. Only Brahmā is awake, seated on the lotus of Vishnu's navel, eagerly awaiting another cycle of creation. But

suddenly arises a problem. Coming out of the ears of Hari, two demons, Madhu and Kaitav rush forward to attack Brahmā. Brahma is helpless, because Devi, personified as sleep, had put Vishnu to rest in a state of trance. Who can awaken him ? But if he did not arise the demons would become all powerful. So Brahmā started to chant hymns saluting the Devi. Pleased, she came out from Vishnu's eyes, mouth, nose, arms and heart and stood before Brahmā. Vishnu now awoke and immediately spied the asuras ready to strike Brahmaṇ. Vishnu confronted them and war broke out. For five thousand years the battle ensued but none could defeat the other. Eventually Devi mesmerised the duo – Madhu and Kaitav. Hypnotised they very foolishly asked Vishnu to accept from them any boon. Vishnu saw that here was his chance. He said – ''What else shall I ask from both of you ? Grant me the boon to be able to defeat and slay both of you ?'' Seeing that there was nothing else around but water, the demons made a clever move. Quickly they responded – ''You may slay us where there is no water.'' But the two had underestimated Lord Hari, for can the waters contain the omniscient ? Vishnu took Madhu and Kaitav on his knees and beheaded them with his Sudarshan Chakra.

Here, Devi not only awakened Vishnu, but she also enticed and stupefied the demons. This is the first character of Devi in Sri Sri Chandi.

In the second, she slays the demon Mahisasura with her own hands. The evil one had banished the gods from, and established himself in, the heavens. The defeated devas, led by Brahmā, appealed to Vishnu and Shankara for help. Vishnu and Shiva were enraged to hear of the exploits of the demon. The fire coming out from the anger of Shiva, Vishnu, Brahmā and the other gods crystallised into the form of a mighty energy. A mountain of fire appeared to encompass the horizons. The concentrated force of the gods took on the shape of a woman. This is Devi's rajasic shakti known as Mahalakshmi. The gods made her even more powerful by individually arming her with various weapons.

Mahisasura crumbled against her onslaught and the gods got back their heaven.

In the last part, Devi, as Mahāsaraswati, defeated the asura brothers Sumbha and Nisumbha with their cohorts Dhumralochan, Chandamunda, Raktabija etc. Like Mahisasura these brothers had dethroned the gods from heaven and let loose a reign of terror. The devas turned to Devi for help and her motherly heart melted at their call for assistance. She appeared once more amidst the mountain glory of the Himalayas. Chanda and Munda, dazzled by the brilliance of the divine sight, rushed to tell their masters, Sumbha and Nisumbha, about it. They eagerly suggested – "Why don't one of you accept this jewel amongst women ? You possess the best of everything."

Devi scorned Sumbha and Nisumbha's messenger Sugriba, when he came with the proposal. She said that she was promise-bound to garland only that person who would defeat her or prove to be her equal in combat.

Hearing this the brothers flared up in rage. With sixty thousand soldiers their general Dhumralochana was despatched, followed by four divisions led by Chanda and Munda. But all met defeat at the hands of Devi. Eventually brother Nisumbha gathered together his forces and marched towards her. One by one Raktabija, other wariors, leaders and even Nisumbha too were killed. Only Sumbha was left on the battlefield.

Sumbha thundered – "Devi–do not be proud of your strength. I am alone but you are aided by so many." Devi then decided to impart Advaita knowledge of non-dualism to the asura. She said – "In this universe I alone am there. Who else is there but me ? All these others are but my energies. See – all are concentrated fully in me." Having said so she withdrew all that was outside into within herself. She could no longer be accused of waging an unfair battle. But even in that equal contest Sumbha was defeated. Easily she cut off his head and assured the three worlds of a return to peace. The gods were once more restablished.

Scholars are of the view that Madhu-Kaitav, Mahisasura and Sumbha, epitomise arrogance and pride arising from tamas, rajas and sattwa respectively. The three constituents constantly dwell within and battle with us. The image of the Devi hints at this suggestion. Later it shall be discussed.

Who is Devi ? What is her true nature ? What is the philosophy behind this concept of the Devi ? Through the mouth of devotees, Brahmā and the gods, this answer has been given in Sri Sri Chandi. Chandi repeats and elaborates on the Devi and Ratri Shuktas.

In the Chandi, Devi is eternal. She is universal and omniscient. Nevertheless to help the gods she takes on specific forms. She is indestructible. She is the eternal flame, self effulgent, the primal Mother in whom this universe is contained. Creation and destruction are at her disposal. In her is personified grace, modesty, nourishment, satisfaction, peace and beatitude. Her arms uphold various weapons – hatchet, mace, spear, conch shell etc. The Devi is unparalleled both in beauty as well as in ferocity. Beside her all is naught. Her net of enchantment snares us into the depths of illusion, but yet again it is her strength that gives us the strength to tear apart the web and rise upwards. In the hearts of the evil she dwells as Alakshmī but she herself is Lakshmī the Queen in the abode of the good. She personifies wisdom and respect. How to describe her greatness ? Even Vishnu and Shiva could not assess Devi in her totality. She is Sound itself upholding the Vedas with her vibrations, suckling and nourishing us as we cross the ocean of life, rocking safely on her lap. In her is amalgamated the contradictory qualities of compassion and cruelty. Enraged she destroys the demons ; appeased she grants boons, shelters us under her shadow and quenches our thirst. Strength, peace, beauty, art, memory, motherliness, skill, aptitude and even disillusionment – all flow from her. As pure consciousness she is knowledge itself. All of womankind represent her. From her comes supreme liberation. The gunas are in her but she is not in them. To crush evil, time and again does she appear with her teeth bared, wearing a garland of human heads

and holding another in her hand. Countless are her names – Nanda, Sakambharī, Durgā, Bhimā, Brahmarī, Raktadantikā, etc. The Devi is committed to help whenever the need arises.

The fifty one Shakti Pithas

We have already narrated the episode of Shiva mourning the death of his beloved Sati. We also know that to appease Shiva, Vishnu used his Chakra to scatter this land with fifty one pieces of Sati's holy body. These have become 51 pithas or pilgrim spots. Pitha means a seat. The one primal energy has taken on different names, mingled with the soil and threaded the country into a single garland of fifty one jewels. Consequently the entire country has become holy. All of these pithas are in the Indian subcontinent – mainly in India proper as well as in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

In our discussion we have analysed that Shiva and Shaktī are inseparable. The fifty one pithas too are associated with different name of Shiva. It is customary to offer salutations to Bhairav also ; otherwise the puja is incomplete. Apart from the fifty one main pithas there are innumerable secondary centres. There is however a lot of controversy regarding their identity and geographical location. It is unnecessary to weigh down the reader with these trivialities. Devibhagawat refers to two hundred sixteen pithas. The Rudramal Tantra, Kubji Tantra, Jnanarnab Tantra mention ten, forty two and fifty pithas respectively. Matsya and Kalika Puranas also name Shakti pithas, but generally the fifty one pithas of Tantra Churamoni are accepted by the majority. Here too we have listed the aforesaid fifty one pithas and kept in brackets the names in dispute.

Location	Part of Sati	Name of Shakti	Name of Bhairav
1. Hingulaya (at present Hinglaj in Baluchistan)	Centre of her head	Kattori (here she is naked)	Bhimalochan
2. Sakkar of Sindh was known in ancient times as Sarkara or Karbir.	Three eyes	Mahisa-mardini	Krodish
3. Sugandha (Sikarpur, Barisal ?)	Nostrils	Sunanda	Trambak
4. Kashmir	Neck	Mahamaya	Trisande-shwar
5. Jwalamukhi (Punjab Kangra zilla)	Tongue	Ambika	Unmatta
6. Jalladhar in Himalaya Trigarta Pradesh	Left breast	Tripurma-lini	Bheeshan
7. Baidyanath (Bihar)	Heart	Jaydurga	Vaidyanath
8. Near Pasupatinath tirtha in Nepal	Right knee	Mahamaya	Kapali
9. Manas Sarovar in the inaccessible Himalayan regions	Right hand (according to Tantrachuramoni)	Dakshayani	Amar
10. Utkal (known as Virajakhetra)	Navel	Bimala	Jagannath
11. Shalgram (at the source of Nepal's river Gandaki)	Right cheek	Gandak Chandi	Chakrapani
12. Bahula (Ketugram-Bardhaman)	Left arm	Bahula	Bhiruk
13. Ujjaini (is it Bardhaman zilla's Ujani (Kogram) or Western India's famous Ujjaini ?)	Left elbow	Mangal Chandi or Harasiddhi (Does not tally with 'Tantrachuramoni)	Kapilambar or Mahakal

Location	Part of Sati	Name of Shakti	Name of Bhairav
14. Famous Chattal near Sitakunda - Chandranath Hill	Right arm fell on the hill	Bhavani	Chandrasekhar
15. Kumarikunda - few miles from Sitakunda- said to be the most important pitha	Back	Sarbani	Neemish
16. Udaipur in kingdom of Tripura	Right feet	Tripur-sundari	Tripuresh (or Nal ?)
17. Trisrota (on the banks of river Teesta, Shalbari)	Left feet	Brahmari (or Amari?)	Bhairav (or Iswara ?)
18. Kamagiri (Kamarupa in Assam)	Female organ	kamakhya	Umananda
19. Bhutadhatri (Khir-gram, Bardhaman)	Right toe	Yugadya (Yogadya)	Khirkhandak (Khirakantha)
20. Kali pitha (Kali ghat, Calcutta)	Right toe	Kalika	Nakuleesh
21. Prayag	All the fingers	Lalita	Bhava
22. Jayanta (Baur gram in kingdom of Jayanti)	Left thigh	Jayanti	Kramadishwar
23. Kiritdesa (Kirit kona, Murshidabad)	Crown of her head	Bimala	Samvarta
24. Karnata	Ear (left?)	Jaydurga	Abhiru
or Jaranpur gram in Bardhaman	Head	Jaydurga	Krodish
25. Varanasi (Mani-karnika ghat)	Bejwelled ear rings	Vishalak-shmi	Kalbhairav
26. Kuruskhetra	Heel (left)	Sthanu	Aswanath

Location	Part of Sati	Name of Shakti	Name of Bhairav
27. Sriparvat (at the confluence or Krishnā & Tungabhadrā in Madras)	Right heel or right ear	Sundari	Sundarananda
28. Manibandha either in Manipur or Pushkar tirtha	Wrist (left)	Gayatri	Sarvananda
29. Srishaila (Sri Hatta)	Back of neck	Mahalakshmi	Sambarananda (or Sarvananda)
30. Kanchidesa Is it South India's Kanchipur or in Birbhum by the river Kopai ?	Skeleton - according to Tantrachramoni or waist – according to Annadamangal	Devgarbha	Ruru
31. Ratnavali Is it by the banks of Ratnakar known today as Kananadi at Khanakul -Krishnagar or at the confluence of Bagmati and Ratnavali in Nepal's Promodatirtha?	Right shoulder	Kumari (Shiva ?)	Shiva (Kumar?)
32. Attahasa (Vardhaman's Dakshindihi and Birbhum's Lavpur both make claims. Birbhum's Tarapitha is not recognised as pitha, But I witnessed an unforgettable sight here. Embedded in stone was the pupil of an eye which could see all sides. It has been stolen.	Lower lip	Phullara	Viswaesh
33. Kalamadhav (by the banks of river Sone?)	Left hip	Kali	Asitanga

Location	Part of Sati	Name of Shakti	Name of Bhairav
34. Banks of the Narmada	Right hip	Sona	Bhadrasen
35. Ramgiri in M.P (known today as Ramtek)	Right breast	Shivani	Chanda
36. Vrindaban	Hair of her head	Uma	Bhutesh
37. Suchidesa (Anal?)	Upper set of teeth	Narayani	Sanghar
38. Panchasagar (Hardwar's Panchakunda?)	Lower set of teeth	Varahi	Maharudra
39. Kartoyatot (Bhawbanipore, Bagura)	Her bedding and seat (or left ear?)	Aparna	Vamana (or Vamesh)
40. Bibhasak (in Tamluk, Midnapore?)	Left heel	Bhimrupa Kapalini	Sarvananda (Kapali?)
41. Pravash (Somnath in Kathiawad)	Stomach (upper lip?)	Chandra-bhaga	Bakratunda
42. Bhairav hill in Avanti by the banks of Sipra	Upper lip	Mahadevi (or Avantidevi)	Bhairav (or Lam-bakarna)
43. (Nasik as told in Ramayana) on land and water	Chin	Brahmari	Vikrataskha
44. Banks of Godavari	Left cheek	Viswama-trika or Rakini	Dandapani (Viswesh?) or Vatsanava
45. Mithila	Left shoulder	Uma (Mahadevi?)	Mahodar
46. Nalhati (Birbhum)	tube of neck	Kalika	Yogish (or Yogesh ?)
47. Bakreshwar	Mind (Forehead?)	Mahisha-mardini	Bakranath

Location	Part of Sati	Name of Shakti	Name of Bhairav
48. Nandipur (Saithia, Birbhum?)	Necklace	Nandini	Nandikeshwar
49. Biratdesa (Rajputana)	Left toe	Ambika	Amrita
50. Jessore	Hands	Yosho-eshwari	Chanda
51. Srilanka In the Puranas it is said that Ravan was a devotee of Shakti and Shiva	Anklets	Indrakshi	Rakheswar

The fifty one pithas have tried to unite the various groups of Shaktas. It's greatest contribution is to remind Bharatvarsha of her majestic unity. But today where is that Mahabharat ? On the political field it has been sliced into bits and pieces. But in the spiritual and cultural arena, Bharat's oneness will never fade – atleast deep in our thoughts and mind.

The significance and history of the name Durgā

In the Narayan Upanishad, which is part of Krishnayajur Veda's Taitteriya Aranyak, reference is made to "Durga". In Yajika Upanishad "Durgi" is used and both to be the same.

Daityanāśārthavacano dakāraḥ parikīrtitaḥ ।
Ukāro vighnanāśasya vācako vedasammataḥ ॥
Repho rogaghnavacano gaśca pāpaghnavācakaḥ ।
Bhayasatrughnavacanaścakāraḥ parikīrtitaḥ ॥
Smṛtyuktiśravaṇād yasyā ete naśyanti niścitam ।
Tato durgā hareḥ śaktirhariṇā parikīrtitā ॥
Durgeti daityavacano'pyākāro nāśavācakaḥ ।
Durgaṁ nāśayati yā nityaṁ sā durgā vā prakīrtitā ॥

Vipattivācako durgaś cākāro nāś avācakaḥ |
Taṁ nanāś a purā tena budhaidurgā prakīrtitā ||
(Śabdakalpadrum)

Thus there is no doubt about the name being very ancient.

Etymology

The syllable ''Da'' means slayer of the demon ; ''U'' is one who removes obstacles ; ''ref'' is one who cures disease ; ''ga'' is eradicator of evil ; ''ah'' means one who imbibes fearlessness. Thus Durga is one who saves us from demons, obstacles, disease, evil, fear and enemies. In another sense it is the one who slays the evil doer Durgo, and is worshipped as the eternal Durga. So Durgo stands for danger and by adding ''sh'' it becomes Durga or she who slays evil. In the Puranas this explanation is upheld.

Skandapurana narrates the slaying of Durgasura, son of the demon Ruru, which made Devi universally worshipped as Durga. The gods had asked for Mahadeva's help and under his instructions Devi had taken up the sword. In Sri Sri Chandi, Devi herself says – I am revered as Durgadevi because I have vanquished the asura Durgam.

Tatraiva ca badhiṣyāmi durgamākhyaṁ mahāsuram |
Durgādevīti vikhyātaṁ tanme nāma bhaviṣyati ||
(ŚRĪ ŚRĪ Candī)

Durgam is indeed a vile creature. It attacks all living beings. Ignorance compels us to be born again and again only to suffer repeatedly. This cycle comes to an end only when Devi takes up the sword of knowledge and decapitates the asura.

Gramatically analysed the word means that the philosophy behind Devihood is very difficult or durgam.

The various aspects of her worship

Devi is serene and calm but at the same time fierce and angry. In her serenity she upholds creation and protects her devotees. Enraged she takes on the mantle of destruction, exterminating demonic forces throughout the ages. Twofold are the fruits of Devi's puja – devotion and liberation. Two types of devotees worship her. The Immortals in heaven, King Surath, Sri Rama the conqueror of Ravana, the great warrior Arjuna, Maharashtra's monarch Shivaji, Rajput's hero Rana Pratap Singh, Sikh Guru Govind Singh and other kings and national leaders worshipped Durga the Goddess of war to gain valour, wealth, victory, independence and to vanquish opponents. But Samadhi vaiṣya, Sadhak Ramaprasad, Kamalantakanta, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Bama Khyapa and other seekers, by worshipping the goddess who is compassionate, merciful and serene have got love, faith, knowledge and spirit of renunciation leading to total Liberation.

The Durgā puja of King Surath and Samadhi Vaisya

In Sri Sri Chandi it is said that king Surath and Samadhi Vaisya, according to the advice of Muni Medhash, shaped a clay image of Durga and meditated on it for three long years resolving to offer their own blood as sacrifice. Pleased with this, the Devi appeared before them ready to grant boons. King Surath got back his lost kingdom but Samadhi wanted realisation that would lead to ultimate Liberation. King Surath had been the victim of betryal by his own men who had plotted with foreign invaders. Samadhi had been banished by his avaricious wife and sons. Both Surath and Samadhi were confusedly wandering when they met and exchanged tales of misfortune at the hermitage of Muni Medhasa. The king could not forget his lost kingdom and Samadhi found himself still pining for his ungrateful family. Why was it so ? When will this mirage break ? What was needed was a true guru who would explain these apparent contradictions. Muni Medhasa was near at hand. He said –

"Look – it is Mahamāyā who creates these illusory attractions. She is so powerful that even great scholars are influenced. She is the cause that ties us to our bonds of life. And again – it is she who cuts these knots when pleased and grants us liberation. Pray to her and ask for whatever you so desire."

King Surath and the merchant Samadhi took this advice to heart and worshipped Devi Durga during the summer solstice. This is the favourable time for the gods. The winter solstice is for the worship of the ancestors.

Sri Ramachandra's Akalbodhan

A description of Sri Rama's unseasonal worship of the Devi has been given in Devi Bhagawat, Brihaddharma Purana and Sri Mahabhagavat. It was performed during the winter solstice.

Daughter of king Janak, beloved of Sri Rama, the pure Sita had been kidnapped by Ravana, king of the man-eating Demons, scourge of the three worlds. With the help of his band of monkeys Sri Ramachandra then attacked golden Lanka.

A fierce combat broke out between Rama and Ravana. Ravana's cherished family deity was Maheshwari herself. Unless and until she deserted Ravana it was impossible to defeat him. Therefore, Brahmā and the gods resolved to worship Mahamāyā for the destruction of Ravana and the well being of Rama. Brahma descended on earth and appearing before Rama on the battlefield advised him to offer puja to the Devi. With slight alterations this has been retold in the three Prayukta Puranas.

It is said by historians that the image of Durga which we worship with such pomp and grandeur was initiated by the devoted king Kangsha Narayan in Bengal. Durga puja is referred to as the Aswamedha of Kali yuga or the Horse–sacrifice of today. It involves great expenditure, time and depth of understanding in comparison to the worship of other gods. Amongst all – big or small, it awakens unparalled consciousness and joy.

In Bengal, the rules enunciated in any one of the three Puranas – Brihannandikeshar, Devi and Kalika are followed for the annual worship of Durga. But basically there is more similarity than difference between the three.

The initiation of Durgā Pūja

Here sankalpa means the resolution taken during this particular span of time. It is this resolution that goads us on to perform the rituals and worship of Durga puja. Where the resolution is firm and deep, where there is concentration and respectful devotion, worship becomes successful. Worship of all gods need some sort of resolution but in the case of Durga puja it has a special characteristic.

There are seven types of sankalpa calculated from the ninth, first, sixth, seventh or eighth day of the new moon. It involves changing of Durga's hymns and japa. The pitcher is installed as her symbol and worshipped as the container of her Shakti.

The sixth day – Sashti and Bodhan

The puja starts from Sashti when the Goddess is invited to descend. Introductory puja of Bodhan is performed near the Bel tree accompanied by the chanting of hymns.

Aiṁ rāvaṇasya badhārthāya rāmasyānugrahāya ca ।
Akāle brahmaṇā bodho devyāstvayi kṛtaḥ purā ॥
Ahampyāś'vine tadvad ṣaṣṭhyāṁ sāyāhne bodhayāmi vai ।
Dharmārthakāmamokṣāya varadā bhava ś'obhane ॥
Om ś'akreṇa saṁbodhya svarājyamāptaṁ
Tasmādahaṁ tvāṁ pratirodhayāmi ।
Yathaiva Rāmeṇa hato das'āsyastathaiva ś'atrūn
Vinipātayāmi ॥ etc.

"Oh Devi – in the ancient days Brahma had offered unseasonal puja to you to destroy Ravana and help Rama. Thus I also worship you on the sixth day of this autumn month of

Aswin. Oh Divine, manifest yourself in the form of Durga to grant dharma, wealth, our desires and Liberation. Indra had gained his kingdom by worshipping you. Like him I too desire wealth and power. Let me have the strength to kill my enemies as Rama destroyed Ravana.''

Why does the season of Durga puja start with worship of the Bel tree ? This tree is known as Sribriksha or the Tree of Grace. Durga too symbolises wealth, power and victory. That is why it is but natural that until the spirit of Durga is established in the image or pratima the tree is worshipped as her symbol.

In the Puranas and Tantric literature great importance has been given to this tree for it's herbal medicinal powers.

''Brahmaviṣṇuśivāḥ patre vṛntañca śaktirūpiṇī ।''—Purāṇa
''Ūradhapatraṁ haro jñeyaḥ patraṁ vāmaṁ vidhiḥ svayam ।
Ahaṁ dakṣiṇa patrañca trpatradalamityuta ॥''

— ŚRĪ Viṣṇu

''Vilvavṛkṣaṁ tathā devi bhagavān śaṅkaraḥ svayam ।''
''Merumandārakailāsa – himavacchikhare girou'' etc.

Brahmā, Vishnu and Shiva are its three leaves and Shakti is the stem. It has the same greatness as the trident or trishul and is thus a favourite of Shiva.

Adhivash

On the evening of Sashti, after Bodhan, is Adhivash when formal preparations are inaugurated for the worship. Here also the prime object is the Bel tree. Hymns are chanted and the clay image is made ready for the Devi to descend.

Puja on the days of Saptami, Ashtami and Navami

On the Seventh, eighth, and ninth days Devi's puja is performed with great pomp and grandeur. The nine plants are bathed, the eyes are given sight and the image is made to come

alive. The rituals involves the great bath, offering of incense and sixteen ingredients, lighting of the yajna flame, sacrifice, scriptural puja, worship of Devi's adornments, of twenty four female deities (the yoginis), of the guardians of the Directions, of the Twilight Hours of Sandhi and worship of the Virgin.

Vijaya on the tenth day of Dasami and worship of Aparajita plant

"*Om gaccha gaccha paraṁ sthānaṁ yatra devo Maheśvaraḥ| Saṁvatsaravyatīte tu punarāgamanāya ca*" etc.

"*Vijayalābhakāmo'parājitā pūjanamahaṁ kariṣye |*"

On the tenth day from the new moon the pitcher, symbolising the Devi, is immersed with a farewell-chanting speeding her on her journey back to the abode of Maheswar and requesting her to return again to us the following year. Next is worship of the Aparajita plant. The name itself signifies that which cannot be vanquished.

Inspiration of omniscient primal energy behind the puja of the Devi

Devi Durga is the incarnation of strength, force and majesty. Likewise her worship too is grand and elaborate. Here we have attempted to very briefly sketch the bare outlines of her puja from the beginning upto the worship of the Aparajita plant on the last day. But the main theme threading the pearls is the worship of valour. Enemies are to be vanquished ; lost kingdoms to be recovered, victory, fame, peace and prosperity are to be won. Those who wish to go deeper may consult Purohit Darpan and other texts to understand the intricacies.

We find the same idea running through not only sequence of rituals but in the conception of her image and the narration of her legend. Her ten arms upholding weapons guard the ten corners. At her feet lies the vanquished demon and her mascot-

carrier is the king of animals – the lion. She is the destroyer of the asuras Madhukautav, Mahisasura, Chandamunda, Raktabija and Sumbha-Nishumbha. Repeatedly she returns to the defeated gods, their lost glory, for the Devi is promise bound to come again and again to slay evil. At the rose petals of her feet we surrender – "Grant us beauty, victory, success and help us to overcome our enemies." Today we see an unprecedented increase in the number and the outward vulgar show of pomp and grandeur surrounding Durga Puja. But unfortunately the accompanying spirit of worship underlying the quality of valour and strength is becoming faint and dim. Will it degenerate into only a futile hedonistic barren display ?

Shakti is not two but one

Listening to the legend of Devi's combat with asura it is but natural to ask – then is Shakti not one but two ? Although she took shape from the combined force of the devas, her opponents are Mahisasura and Sumbha-Nishumbha. Therefore in the idea of Devihood where do we find the principle of Advaita ? The Christians and Muslims establish side by side the twin principles of God and Satan. Likewise the Hindus too acknowledge the asura. The argument for Devi's Advaitaism or non-dualism does not seem to hold water ; it appears that the two forces of Good and Evil have to be admitted.

But special note has to be made that in the philosophy of Devihood there is no scope to think on the lines of dualism. Apparently, for the sake of illustration and variety, the two forces might appear different but in principle the Asura is but a creation of Maya. Enthroned in the majesty of her power, to manifest her strength, Devi creates the Asura from her own consciousness. The lamp sparkles against the background of black darkness, as does the white strokes of moonlight etched on a canvas of ultramarine. The stars sparkle bright on the night of the new moon. As white is to darkness, so too, to manifest and illustrate the greatness of the Divine Mother, she creates the

dark Asura to remind us of the whiteness of Truth. We would not have been able to understand and realise the Devi if she did not appear repeatedly in contrast to the Asuras. Our reverence for her would not have surfaced if we had not seen her, with our limited senses, in the role of protector of her children. She who can make the impossible to be, has created this illusion. The ignorant will view this with eyes of a dualist but to the knowledge of the Seer all is but one. The Lion, Asura, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya, Ganesh and Shiva are all branches of the one tree stretched across the semi circle frame arching across her image – the Chalchitra. Devi Durga is Advaita – non-dual.

Devi's puja as a symbol of integrity

The supreme principle of unbroken unity is the underlying spirit of Advaitaism. Undoubtedly she symbolises total integrity and in the legend is manifest this ideal of oneness. In Sri Sri Chandi the gods are found to be worshipping her as the combined force of all their strength.

"Niḥśeṣadevagaṇaśaktisamūhamūrte" —*ŚRĪ ŚRĪ Candī.*

They find their own selves in her – not in imagination but as a reality. Defeated by the asuras the gods were led by Brahma to the presence of Vishnu and Shiva. What happened thereafter is divinely illuminating as well as rich in philosophic context. We have already narrated how, listening to the narration of the evil exploits of Mahisasura, a mighty strength began to emanate forth from Brahmā, Vishnu, Shiva and the other gods. Mahāmayā became manifest, shaped from the combined light of all. Shiva gave her form, Yama her hair, Vishnu her arms, the Moon her twin breasts, Indra her waist, Varuna her hips and thighs, Prithvi her rear, Brahmā her legs, the Sun her toes, the Vasus her fingers, Kuber her nose, Prajapati her teeth, the Fire god her three eyes, the Twilight Hours her eyebrows, Vayu her two ears etc. One by one the gods shaped each part of her. They gave to her their weapons and carriers. The gods had lost be-

cause they had scattered their forces but with the gathering together of it there was hope once more. Thoughts on unity took shape into a concrete reality. The ideas and strength of the community blended into a cohesive force making integrity a perceptible truth.

The last episode of Sri Sri Chandi upholds the same principle. Whipped out of the heavens by the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha, the gods went to the Himalayas and prayed to Vishnumaya. Not alone, but they went altogether. In their hymns they visualised the Devi as unity incarnate. In her dwelled strength, nationhood, consciousness, hunger, thirst, modesty, peace, grace and humility – one in all.

''Sarvabhūteṣu saṁsthitā'' — *Candī*

In this united endeavour the gods once more got back their feeling of being one and this gave them the strength to throw out the usurpers.

The worship of the Devi hints at the development of the race

Unity lies at the base of development of any nation. This underlying cohesive force branches out into various welfare activities. In the Vedic shukta, Devi herself says – ''I am the State. I am the Soul of the Universe.'' In her image is potrayed in detail the picture of a united nation.

In all countries, amongst all the races, four classes of people can be identified – the scholar, the warrior, the trader and the worker. Generally it is the man of learning who leads the nation chalking out its various programmes. The valorous warrior protects this edifice from internal and external harm. Under this umbrella the traders husband the resources of the country and multiply its produce in the field of agriculture, animal wealth and trade. To the worker his capital is his physical strength – a blessing from birth. Following the instructions of the other three classes the man of work upholds the total welfare of the country.

These four can be categorised as strength manifesting itself out of knowledge, valour, resources and manpower. If there is a dearth of any one single force, the fate of the entire nation is at stake. But where the four complement each other in an orchestrated manner, the country marches on from success to success. Then it can be said that, that race is progressive ; that country is firm and strong and that it is the shelter for the sane elements of the entire world. Keeping in view the total welfare of the state the terms Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra came to be coined. It does not divide but it compartmentalises only to unite. Lately we have overlooked the main reason for this. Consequently it has resulted in casteism being a curse rather than a blessing.

To the right of Durga are Lakshmi and Ganesha, while to the left are Saraswati and Kartikeya. Lakshmi stands for wealth or Vaishya power, Ganesha for the brute force of manpower, Kartikeya represents the strength of the warrior and Saraswati for knowledge. Devi Durga, when she descends down to us, never does so alone. She brings her four children – the four strands of the rope of strength. This is her total form. And with her children she is the deification of the nation as a whole. A country if it is to bloom, must include all these four aspects. Truly Rishi Bankimchandra had adulated Devi in his song "Bande Mataram".

"*Tvaṁ hi durgā das'apraharaṇadhāriṇī* |"

The music inspired the hearts of millions of Bharat to fight for independence. After thousands of years of servitude Bharat is once more rising with the blessings of the Mother.

Social Development and Social Welfare depicted in the worship of Devi

Durga Devi guards the ten directions with her ten arms. Having discussed Viswakarma we have come to know that the

hands are the symbols for work – the very cause for it. To put an end to indolence, sloth, laziness, cowardice and lack of potency, as well as to instil vigour in the community, Durga brandishes her ten arms calling all to work. She rejuvenates her half-dead children by setting an example of action, and it must be the armed combined effort of all, for the common weal.

The image of the Devi not only unfolds the steps of worship and its stages but in her legend is sketched the development and welfare of the society. Here lies the unbroken link between the goddess and the community. The goddess lives in our midst. She leaves behind the comforts of her majestic dwelling in the mountains to serve the eternally problem-ridden poverty-stricken mankind. Devi continually endeavours to tame and uplift the animal in man. She manifests herself in everything from agriculture to mining, health, animal husbandry and morality. The rituals of her great bath on Ashtami hint at this secret deep significance.

It is customary to bathe the Devi with the waters from the rivers, streams, lakes and oceans of Bharat. The map of a united India jumps to our minds – a Bharatvarsha baptised by the waters of her various pilgrim spots. We are awakened anew with the feeling that in ethos and culture Bharat is undivided. The rituals laid down involve active participation of all sections of the society from the scholar to the gardener, potter, the weaver etc. The water used for her bath is extremely significant. In it is soaked five seeds, five plants, cowdung, milk and curd. Thus is acknowledged the great importance of agriculture, forest wealth and animal husbandry. Also is immersed in this water gold, diamond, pearls, ruby and coral, pointing to production of wealth and mining resources. Moreover the puja is incomplete without the soil from the whore-house, making us conscious of our social obligations. In her worship is sketched out our total social and economic commitments.

The force of spirituality framing Devi's worship

The acquirement of independence is not just something externally won – it is a matter of the heart also. Man wants independence or liberation. There is of course a need for becoming free from the chains of the domination of a foreign race. But that is just the outer crust. The sages of Bharata had conceived of a liberation greater than this in depth and extent. That is concerned with the independence of the soul and liberation of the spirit.

In discussing the worship of Durga we had raised the questions of independence and liberation. Political freedom gives us national independence, but the spirit searches for liberation. Durga Devi promises us not only national independence but hints at the path to liberation. Her one foot is on the lion while the other is on the blood-soaked shoulder of the demon pierced by her trident. Here lies the secret for the spiritual seeker.

The three gunas, sattwa, rajas and tamas are constantly at play inside each and every unit. Sattwa is pure and expressive giving us knowledge and bliss. Rajas drives us on to work giving rise to desires and activity. Tamas is ignorance, inertia and illusion. Although apparently the three work at tangents, actually they are strands of the one rope that individually or unitedly binds us. Without untying the knots, liberation cannot be gained. But how can we pierce through this soil and rise above our binding roots ? Rajas has to be churned out from tamas, and the cream of sattwa extricated from it, to lead the way to the transcedental stage of union with pure Consciousness – to be one with Brahma.

The lion at Devi's feet symbolises rajas which has attacked the tamas of the asura. Devi herself stands for pure sattwa. She controls the lion and goads him to kill asura. Seen from another way it is Devi's trishul that pierces the demon. Rajas must combat tamas. At the opportune moment however it is sattwa that will give the death blow. The sequence of sattwa, rajas and tamas is to be noted. At the end of the road is Devi herself. She

releases the seeker from the clutches of ignorance and establishes him in the liberated freedom of his Self.

Seen from another angle the battle is between Devihood and the demonic forces. These two protagonists are engaged in constant combat behind the veil of this empirical world. The seeker has to win the battle to gain liberation. On one side are the rajastamas combinations of arrogance, pride, ego, anger, cowardice and ignorance. On the other are arrayed penance, charity, purity, renunciation, truth, non-violence, forgiveness, perseverance, kindness, simplicity etc. The first group is demonic and the other is godly. Do you wish to conquer these lower dark forces reigning inside you ? Then concentrate and awaken the forces of good. Do you not know that the Devi is a concentrated manifestation of all that is positive and truth ? It was this combined force that was able to defeat evil forces. So unless the two internal forces are brought face to face, darkness will not give way to light.

Yes – this combat is no small matter. It can't be waged without weapons. Devi sports her weapons. But where are yours? Discrimination and renunciation constitute your weapons. Be on the alert with open swords ready to fence off surprise enemy attacks. Seeing your efforts Devi will come forward to guard all the ten directions. The secret principle of this combat is fearlessness. Devi herself is fearlessness personified. This battle requires extreme valour and bravery and Durga Devi is the fountain of all strength. At every step there is danger which the seeker must crush to reach the goal. That is why Ganesha, who tramples underfoot all obstacles and trumpets victory, is at Devi's right. For this the potential power of a pure mind nourished by the force of simple living and high thinking is required. The understanding of the self through study of scriptures and chanting of hymns will help us to light the lamp in our inner temple – the holy of holies. The goddess Saraswati at the left of Devi Durga personifies intellect and speech and lights the lamp of knowledge. To march from darkness to light the warrior has to take the help of all these combined forces, for victory is

for those who wear the shield of Durga's name and throw themselves into the thick of battle.

Durgā's Lion

The king of the jungles – the lion, is Durga's mascot. In Kalika purana the legend is that Lord Hari takes the form of the lion to carry the goddess. (In one sense Hari means the lion.) Mahisasura was actually an offshoot of Mahadeva. But Hari alone was unable to bear the might of Durga, and so he sought the help of Mahadeva, who in the form of Asura lay at her feet. Shivapurana however does not agree on this point. Here it is said that Brahma gives unto Devi the lion as her carrier to help her destroy Sumbha and Nishmbha.

Brahmaṇāpi prahṛṣṭena tasyai paramaśaktaye |
Prabalaḥ keśarī datto vāhanatve samāgataḥ ||
— *Śiva Purāṇa* (21/10)

Why is the lion her riding animal ? This question can be answered from different angles.

Firstly the valour of the lion is in tune with the other externals of Durga which are manifesting strength. The Devi is the Empress of the Universe. The lion too heads the animal kingdom. As Durga displays her weapons, so too does the lion bare his claws and fangs. Durga's matted locks match the gorgeous mane of the beast who is the best protagonist to challenge the demon in combat. Zoologists opine that the lion is so powerful that one swipe of its paws is capable of crushing the brain of the buffalo.

Strengthwise it is but the lion which is most suited to be Devi's mascot. According to Devi purana, each part of the lion manifests various energies of the gods. Vishnu graces the lion's neck, Mahadeva his head, Parvati his forehead, Durga his breast, Kartikeya his knuckles, the serpents his sides, the twins Aswinikumar his ears, the Sun and Moon his eyes, the Vasus his

teeth, Varuna his tongue, Chandika his roar and Yama with Yaksha his two cheeks.

There is a dual significance of the concept of the lion taking into consideration the welfare of the individual and the collective. It teaches us the greatness of sacrifice for the good of the many, because the king of the jungles is ever at the feet of the Devi, eternally ready to serve her. Again note – man is but an animal. But man wants to subdue that animality to felicitate manifestation of the divine which is also present in human beings. This principle of animality has to be surrendered at the feet of Durga. Then only, with her grace, will blossom forth from our secret selves, the flower of spirituality. Although the lion is the king of beasts, by her grace he uses his brute force to bear her majesty.

Secondly, the Devi who is a personification of unity, wants the good of all. It is the admixture of sattwa with rajas that clears the path for the common welfare. Previously we have noted how the lion is the symbol of rajasic activity. Through rajas flows a fierce strength that cannot be dammed. But if this allies with the dark force of tamasic inertia, a flood of misery will be released. Bestial evil will take on the reins. But under the control of sattwa this same force can be channelised to irrigate the barren land. Devi, the symbol of sattwa, has kept the lion by her side to fight the Asuras. The lion is a vehicle which responds to her controls to eliminate all that is base and low. To protect and nourish the nation, rajasic strength is required. But that strength must obey the laws of ethics and truth. Otherwise the flood gates of doom will open. In worshipping Devi Durga we ask of her the boon of strength. But it must be tempered with the quality of sattwa. By keeping the lion as her mascot does not the Devi give us this lesson ?

CHAPTER XVI

GAṆEŚA

Hymn

Om kharvaṁ sthulatanuṁ gajendravadanaṁ lambodaraṁ
sundaram |
Prasyandan-
madagandhalubdhamadhupavyālolagaṇḍasthalam ||
Dantāghātavidāritārirudhiraiḥ sindūraśobhākaram |
Vande śailasutāsutaṁ gaṇapatiṁ siddhipradaṁ karmasu ||

He who is short and copious, whose face is that of an elephant, whose stomach is large, who is captivating, whose divine scent intoxicates the honey bees to flock around him, who is baptised with the blood of the enemies he has pierced with his tusks, to that Ganapati, son of Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya, do we pay homage. He blesses all our endeavours and grants our boons.

Gaṇes'a in the Vedas

In the Rigveda it is Vrihaspati and Brahmanspati who is Ganesha. Vrihaspati is the priest who chants eulogies. His horns are sharp. In various references it is elucidated how the sharp horned one came to be identified with the one tusked Ganapati.

In the Rigvedic mantra (2/23/1) Brahmanspati is asked to come down as Ganapati. Amongst the devas he is Ganapati, the wisest amongst the wise, the supreme amongst the intellectuals, the most successful king and the lord of all hymns. In another Rigvedic mantra (10/112/9) it is Indra who is referred to as Ganapati. He was the first god. So the scholars say that he is the peer among the ascending philosophers. Without him no great work is possible.

Ni ṣu sīda gaṇapate gaṇeṣu tvāmāhurvipratamaṁ kavīnām |
Na ṛte tvat kṛyate kiṁ canāre mahāmarka maghavaścitramarca||

In the Yajurveda mantra (23/19) in a hymn to Brhamanspati or to the Rising Sun, he is referred to as Ganapati amongst the gods, the beloved amongst the loved ones and the king of all abodes.

"*Gaṇānāṁ tvā gaṇapatiṁ havāmahe* |
Pryāṇāṁ tvā pryapatiṁ havāmahe |
Nidhīnāṁ tvā nidhipatiṁ havāmahe |"

That Ganapati and Ganesha are one and the same, is made clear in a specific hymn—(10).

"*Gaṇapataye svāhā*"—In Krishnayajurveda's Kanva Samhita it is instructed to offer ablutions to the yajna fire in the name of Ganapati. In the Maitrani Samhita of the same Veda there are few other hymns in honour of Ganesha. In Krishanyajur Veda's Maitreya Samhita, Krishanayurveda Taitteriya Aranyaka's Narayan Upanishad, and in Ganapatyarthavasirshoupanishad these three hymns are analysed. He is known and meditated upon as the one with the face of an elephant, having one tusk and a bent snout. Without elaborating furthur, in short it may be said that the concept of Ganesha is from the Vedas. Mingling into one with Brahmanspati, Brihaspati and Indra he is a great divinity. In him is manifest the forces of energy, knowledge, preservation and destruction. If the evidences of Ganesh Purana are added to it, then indeed Ganesha is akin to the Great Brahma.

Gaṇes'ha the symbol of Omkar

Ganesha Purana says that Ganesha himself is God as The Omkar—the One who was before the Vedas. The sages, Indra and other gods forever hold him in their hearts. God as the Omkar is the leader of the masses. He is saluted first whenever any work or puja is initiated. The name of Omkar is chanted before all hymns and here we find Ganesha being honoured. It is Ganesha who leads—the God of gods.

Omkārrūpī bhagavān yo vedādou pratiṣṭhitaḥ |
Yaṁ sadā munayo devāḥ smarantīndrādayo hṛdi ||
Omkārrūpī bhagavānuktastu gaṇanāyakaḥ |
Yathā sarveṣu karmasu pūjyate'sou vināyakaḥ ||

The birth of Gaṇes'a

In the Puranas there are many contradictory statements about the birth of Ganesha. Brahmavaivarta, Vamana and Varaha Puranas nurse various opinions. It is not easy to find a note of concord in this discord. Let the reader be presented with the various legends.

Brahmavaivarta Purana says Ganesha as a part of Vishnu was born by his blessings. The legend says that many many years had passed since the marriage of Shiva and Parvati but they remained childless. The Mother of the universe herself was barren ! Can such an irony be suffered ? The desire for a child grew intense and acute within her inner self. Then Shiva said—"Pray to Vishnu." She, who had done severe penances to be blessed with Shiva, now started all over again—this time to beget a child. For a spouse she had desired the primal God Adinath Shankar and perhaps as a son she now prayed for none other than Vishnu himself. The ideal wife and ideal mother are rare—not easy to find. Marriage alone does not make a wife out of woman, just as delivering a child does not make a mother. Both are to be acquired by penance and renunciation.

Sripati was very pleased with Devi. To satisfy her maternal hunger he appeared before her at Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva, to bless her. He himself would be born as her son. Vishnu came disguised as a brahmin. But surprisingly Mahamaya herself could not see through his game. She too had surrendered to her own law of Maya.

As per scriptural rules she observed all the rituals of washing the feet of this guest—the first amongst men, with due reverence. Not only was he a visitor but was a brahmin also. The ideal house-wife that Bhavani is, will but naturally observe the

norms and prevalent customs. Otherwise how will the womenfolk learn to do what is expected of their nature ? "You are the living Flame !"

The guest, after duly accepting all the offerings, suddenly disappeared ! Perhaps it was just another illusion by the Magician of magicians. Suddenly a divine voice floated through the heavens—"Go to your sleeping quarters and behold your beloved son !" Devi ran to her chamber and saw that it was true. Hara-Parvati's bed chamber was aglow with the sight of a babe playfully throwing about his limbs.

In Vamana Purana it is narrated that the daughter of mountain king Girija and spouse of Shankar, created out of her own self a robust son with four arms and the head of an elephant showing all signs of good fortune. He was born without a sire or nayak and came to be known as Vinayak.

Varaha Purana recounts another tale about the birth of Ganesha, which differs from the previous two legends. According to it, Ganesha came into being from the face of Mahadeva. His face reflects the principle of akasha (substratum for sound). This concept of akasha connected with Sound is related to the birth of Ganesha. Again, the god of Speech or the god who chants hymns is Brahmaspati, Vrihaspati or Bachaspati. It is him that we get over here.

Once Mahadeva was thinking—"I see on earth, water, fire and wind but there is no akasha." Thus thinking he suddenly broke into a smile which doubled into laughter. From that laughter came forth a young boy, whose handsome visage matched his valiant profile. That child was a divine sight. The gods looked on long and wonderingly and could not take their eyes away. Devi Parvati too stood unblinking and captivated. Seeing her admiration, Mahadeva suddenly became enraged. Unpredictable is Mahadeva's nature ! A moment ago he whose laughter had made the skies throb with joy, suddenly became inflamed and enraged. Who can understand Mahadeva—hot one moment and cool the very next second ?

Well-once he is angry he is sure to produce something. He cursed. And that too, he cursed the innocent boy. Angrily he said—"Take on the head of elephant. Let your belly be round, and let the serpent be the sacred thread round your neck." This too could not satisfy his anger. From each pore of his skin came forth countless armed vinayaks, copper complexioned, elephant faced and with blue visages. Brahma came forward to calm Mahadeva. Praising him Brahma said—"Oh Lord who holds aloft the spear—be at peace. This boy is none other than a part of you yourself. Be the lord of this child." Thus appeased, Mahadeva accepted him as his son and gave him names like Bignesh (Remover of all obstacles), Ganesh (Mass leader) and Gajanan (Elephant-faced). The Vinayaks were given the sky for their abode and their leader came to be Ganesha. Mahadeva also blessed and pleased his son by ruling that Ganesha was to be saluted first before any other god. Devi Parvati was overjoyed to get Ganesha as her own. She is renowned as the celebrated Mother of Ganesha—Ganeshjanani. With the advent of Ganadevata the joy of the gods knew no bounds. They broke forth into hymns chanting his praise.

The elephant-face of Gaṇes′a

The most popularly accepted legend is narrated in the Brahmavaivarta Purana. It is said that a glance from the god Shoni decapitated the head of Ganesha. But Sri Vishnu, lord of the heavens (Baikuntha), had the head of an elephant, who was sleeping in a deep forest by the banks of the river Pushpabhadra, cut off by his Chakra and fixed onto the neck of Ganesha. Immediately after getting the face of the elephant, Ganesha acquired immortality. Shoni could not actually be blamed for this unfortunate incident. He too had come with the other gods to see this child of Hara. But even so, knowing the fierce destructive power of his own glance, Shoni refrained from looking upon the boy. But Parvati was not well conversed with this fact that a single look from Shoni could reduce the object to ashes. So she

repeatedly requested Shoni to at least once behold the child. To keep her word Shoni was compelled to comply with her request. The result was disastrous. But it was only for a short time because Vishnu soon mended matters. Ganesh came into being, blessed by Vishnu. In this crisis too Vishnu came forth to protect him and Devi quickly recovered from her sorrow.

Who was that elephant whose head was fixed to the torso of Ganesha ? It was Indra's mascot and carrier Airavat. Once the sage Durvasa had presented Indra with the divine flower Parijat which had been given to him by Vishnu. Intoxicated with a feeling of self-importance, Indra disdaining the offer, casually kept the flower on the head of his elephant Airavat. This infuriated Durvasa. He cursed that Indra would forfeit his good fortune and the elephant would lose it's head.

All this leads us to a querie. In the Rigveda we have seen that Indra himself is referred to as Ganapati. In due course the Ganapati of the Vedas has somewhat changed his identity in the Puranas. But even in this transformation, in an effort to keep the continuity, the head of Indra's favourite elephant is made to be fixed onto Ganesha.

The meaning of the word 'Gaṇes'a'

'Gana' with 'Isha' combine to form Ganesha. Gana means the collective and he who is the leader of the community is Ganesha. Now the question is—what is this 'gana' ?

In the Puranas there are two types of ganas. Firstly the followers of Shiva are known as Pramathaganas or Vinayaks. Secondly are the ganas of the gods. In the latter group are included the twelve adityas, eight Vasus, forty nine Vayus, twelve Sadhyas, eleven Rudras, ten Viswadevas, three hundred sixty Tushitas, sixty four Abhaswars, two hundred twenty Maharajiks etc. Ganesha can be said to be the main leader of the two groups. From birth he acquired the right to be worshipped first, before any other god, and thus naturally became the nayak or leader. Actually Ganesha is the personification of the principle of the collective. He is a leader without parallel—Vinayak.

The word 'gana' connotes another meaning. It means the armed forces. Twenty seven elephants, same number of chariots, 81 horses, 135 infantry (27 + 27 + 81 + 135) make up a gana. 3 ganas form a vahini ; 3 vahinis make up a putana ; 3 putanas compose a cham ; 3 chams equate to 1 anikini and 10 anikinis form a akshoihini. So 810 ganas make 1 akshoihini. Is there any connection between these armed forces and Ganapati ? It will not be going out of the way to pause and ponder on this point.

In the Varaha Purana we have seen that the armed Vinayaks came into existence from the anger of Rudra. They were Shiva's followers—his soldiers. Thus it will not be improbable to refer to Ganesha as their leader. In a hymn Ganesha's beauty is eulogised—not the fancy frills of externals but it is the majesty of his tusks piercing the blood soaked enemy. A hundred foes surrender to a thrust from his tusk. Bathing in the blood of his adversary, his complexion takes on the hue of vermillion because red represents the rajas of valour. Ganesha is a brave warrior. He has been awarded the name of Ekadanta—the god with one tooth, because it was while fighting that he broke one of his tusks. The tusk or danta is one of Ganesha's weapons. The word danta is derived from 'dam' a which means to suppress. The mace and wheel too are his other weapons. Thus there is a close link between Ganesha and the ganas of warfare. Unfortunately, of late, we have nearly forgotton this aspect of Ganesha's majesty.

How did Gaṇes'a break his tusk

Ganesha lost a part of his tusk while engaged in warfare with Parasuram, the sworn enemy of the warrior class, the Kashtriyas. Parasuram is the sixth incarnation of Vishnu. Once he wandered into Manas hoping to get a glimpse of Hara-Parvati. But at that time the divine couple were in their inner chamber, fast asleep. Ganesh was guarding the gate. He had been given strict orders not to allow anybody in without prior permission.

But Parasuram insisted upon entering. Upon this Ganesha replied—"I do not have orders". But who will listen to whom ? Ignoring Ganesha, Parasuram tried to force his way in. An exchange of hot words was followed by a violent struggle. Finally war broke out. With a blow from his powerful axe Parasuram broke a tusk of Ganesha and the latter became soaked in blood. Nevertheless he remained unmoved in his stern determination to obey the command of his parents. Even without a tusk ganesha remained firm and resolute.

Meanwhile the din that was created, broke the slumber of Hara and Parvati. Coming near the door they saw on one side Shiva's devotee Bhargava and on the other, arrayed against him, a bleeding Ganesha with a broken tusk. Kumar Ganesha was not at fault. He was faithfully executing his duties, but Bhargava had not behaved like a true disciple. It was ill mannerly to untimely disturb his Guru who was taking rest. However, Shiva could forgive his devotee. But how could the soft heart of a mother suffer this injustice towards her son ? She began to scold Parasuram and became the fierce Chandi in her wrath. Her sharp sword flashed into action. Parasuram drew back in fear ; indeed he had gone too far ! What should he do now ?

There was only one way open to him. With unswerving concentration he meditated on Vishnu. To save both sides, the Lord of Baikuntha, appeared on the scene. But he came disguised as a Brahmin. Hitherto we have already seen the honour with which Devi received brahmin guests. With wise words of solace and consolation the brahmin soon managed to calm down Devi. And thus Bhargava got away with it this time !

The different facets of Gaṇes'a's character

We have already discussed Ganesha's valour, sense of responsibility, devotion to his parents and leadership. The purity and sublimity of his character now needs attention. The fountain of youth's strength is mental balance and self-control. Both are manifested in the young Ganesha. From one example we will get the total picture.

Early in life, Ganesha had resolved to remain a celibate. He decided to undergo austerities for this purpose. But Tulsi, the beautiful daughter of Dharmadhaja, fell in love with Ganesha and wanted to marry him. But the resolute and determined Ganesha, although then in the prime of his youth, remained unswayed by her attractions. He firmly refused her overtures. The shame of a secret love affair, hidden from the eyes of society, could not stain the pure Ganesha.

Frustrated love seeks revenge. Thwarted desire vents its fury in anger and that leads to a crisis of destruction. When Tulsi realised her youth and beauty could not enrapture Ganesha the ascetic, a sense of insult and fury engulfed her. Insane with humiliation she cursed her beloved who had promised never to marry. She hurled these words at him—"You will be compelled to marry !" Ganesha too could not forgive her unreasonable behaviour. He in turn cursed her—"Your lust will turn you away from the gods and you will be enjoyed by the demons !" Both prophesies came to be true. Sometimes later Ganesha took Pushti, the daughter of a god, to be his wife. According to Brhamavaivarta Purana this Pushti is another name for Mahasashti. And Tulsi married the demon Sankhyachura.

Ever since this dispute, the leaves of the tulsi plant (balsam) are not required for puja of Ganesha.

The greatness of the name of Ganes'a

Vishnu himself has eulogised Ganesha. In the hymn (Brahmavaivarta Purana) Ganesha is said to be omniscient, God of all, Pure Knowledge, the Unmanifest, the primal Vibration, Eternal, the Reflection of the Self, the Guru who guides us across life and the Personification of Truth. He is at the same time above the three gunas and also an admixture of them as well. Narada Purana says—"By worshipping Ganesha the seekers of knowledge, of wealth, of progeny and of Liberation—each will get what they so look for."

Vidyārthī labhate vidyām,
Dhanārthī labhate dhanam |
Putrārthī labhate putrān,
Mokṣārthī labhate gatim ||

Hitherto we have referred to certain particular names of Ganesha. That apart he has many names. As Kartikeya's elder brother he is Guhagraja ; his elephant ears are like the winnowing platter surpa, and so he is Surpakarna ; proud of his valour he is Heramba ; remover of all obstacles he is Bighnesh ; he grants all boons and so he is Siddhidata ; the peacock being his carrier he is known as Mayuresha or Mayurpal.

In the 108 hymns to Ganesha it is said that he is the subtlest as well as the greatest. Both extremes are manifest when we meditate on him. We get an external picture of Ganesha when we refer to him as Guhagraja, Surpakarna, Heramba, Mayuresh etc. But in the names of Sarvesh, Avyakta, Akshara, Nitya, Atmaswarupa, Jnanrashiswarupa, Satyaswarupa and others are manifest his sublime inner heights. The latter names are all derivations from Brahma. In Varaha Purana we have seen that Ganesha came into being because Shankar wanted to perceive Akasha—akasha being the principle of vyom (the nearest English translation being 'sky'). Finite man with his limited intellect cannot conceive of what is beyond speech, the omniscient and the Pure Consciousness. But looking at the endless blue sky we get a partial glimpse of the infinite as well as of the collective. In Ganesha Purana this has been discussed. What is without quality or form allows itself to be manifest in form and with attributes as the Mighty One.

Bighnesh Gaṇes'a

Bighnesh is one who removes obstacles. But the real meaning is just the opposite. He who is the lord of impediments is Bighnesh. Actually in the beginning Ganesha was the god of obstacles. In Parasar Smriti it is said Brahma and Shankar, wanting to create hurdles, brought Ganesha or Vinayak into being.

To see that Ganesha does not prevent the seeker from reaching his goal, Ganesha is appeased with puja and rituals. But in the course of time Ganesha came to be known as the remover of obstacles—a personification of beatitude and grace.

Tasmāttadupaśāntyartham samavyarcya gaṇeśvaram |
Snapanam kārayettasya vidhivat puṇyavāsare || 11/9

Gaṇes'a the most learned amongst the wise

We have seen that Brahmanspati of the Vedas is Ganapati and he is a first amongst the scholars. We have also seen that Vishnu himelf has eulogised Ganesha in a hymn as knowledge itself. In the Mahabharata there is a glowing example of his wisdom and learning. He is the scribe who notes down the epic. In that special role the focus is on this side of his character.

The Mahabharata, divided into 18 stages, is the immortal creation of the epic poet Vyasadeva. It is unparalleled as the never ending fountain of politics, sociology, religion and all the branches of mankind's thought. A masterpiece that it is, the Mahabharata sketches the lives of great men and women. It took three long years to be completed.

After having organised himself and set upon the idea to compose this epic, Vyasadeva found himself in a quandry. Who will be his able scribe ? In none could he find the one who could match him in speed. It was a task not meant for ordinary scholars. Only the sensitive, disciplined, austere, tireless and faultless connoisseur of the arts, with a prolific memory could qualify for this post. But where to get this greatest amongst men? In reply to Vyasadeva's querie Brahma replied—"Seek the help of the young Ganesha."

Ganesha holds aloft the wheel or chakra and the mace. But he shows equal dexterity with pen and ink. Ganesha agreed to Vyasadeva's request but there was one condition. There was not to be a single pause ; the flow of Ganesha's writing was not to

be given cause to stop. Vyasa agreed but quickly added his terms to the agreement. Ganesha was not to pen down any stanza without understanding its contents. On his part Ganesha agreed to this. Thus we see that there was a mood of competition in this partnership. The task was herculean and it was to take up a lot of time. Without a sense of exhilaration and excitement it would have been difficult to maintain the flow of enthusiasm ; to disallow fatigue, lassitude and boredom to overcome them. They made each other bound by conditions and the result was that their mutual co-operation electrified and enlivened the venture.

Accordingly the work of dictating and writing started. It was a wonder ! Hardly had the words escaped from the lips of Vyasadeva, than Ganesha penned it down after simultaneously understanding and savouring it. The speed of Ganesha made Vyasadeva almost stumble at times. He hardly got the interim to compose the next stanza. It must be remembered that Ganesha is not given credit for composing the Mahabharata. But the task of writing this down was not the work of the usual run of the mill cleric. It was done with deep insight and knowledge. This union of the poet and the scholar was unique. Mahabharata is unparalleled as a duet performance—wave after wave of poetry rising and dancing on the deep steady ocean of knowledge. Intoxicated with inspiration, the epic poet immersed himself in creation, while Ganesha with his critical knowledge analysed and scrutinised it before putting the contents into writing. This faultless transcribing is Ganesha's contribution to the making of Mahabharata. Undoubtedly Ganesha's brilliance knew no limits, for immediately upon listening to Vyasadeva he did three things simultaneously—understand, appreciate and write. There were times however when Vyasadeva gave trouble to Ganesha. He sometimes uttered such difficult lines that Ganesha had to sweat it out to get to its core. Meanwhile during that interval the epic poet got respite to compose few more stanzas. The difficult stanzas are known as Vyaskuta.

Why first priority is given to the worship of Gaṇes'a

It is ruled that Ganesha is to be worshipped before any other god. But why ? What is its significance and import for the well being of our society ? In the first half we have hinted at what we are now going to analyse.

The Hindus worship many gods. The adoration of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Viswakarma, Vishnu, Shiva, Sitala, Manasa, Durga, Mangal Chandi, Sashti, Kartikeya and other ancients gods are prevalent in Hindu homes. Leaving aside the sages and spiritual seekers of a high level, it may be said that the masses always pray for something desired. They ask these gods to grant them boons which might be either for the individual or for the collective. Many are the needs for which the gods are appeased—Laksmi for wealth ; Saraswati for knowledge ; Viswakarma for skill in arts and crafts ; Kartikeya for good subjects and success and Sitala for relief from illness. For each of our problems there is a corresponding god. But Ganesha stands for the collective.

Previously it has been said that Ganesha represents the masses and is the symbol of the collective. In all spheres—whether it is to do with economics, industry, agriculture, education, irrigation or health, without integration no nation can rise. So the primary aim is to awaken the collective strength of the masses or ganas. If Ganesha's puja is performed first without any shortcomings, then the other gods—Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya, Sashthi, Sitala, Harihara etc. are automatically satisfied. Where strength is united, himalayan mistakes vanish and hurdles are overcome in the twinkling of an eye. To manifest this force of the masses Ganesha is referred to as Bighnesh, granter of boons (Siddhidata) and it is laid down that it is Ganesha who should be worshipped first.

The collective force in Kali Yuga

In this Kaliyuga of today mankind's strength is greatly diminished. Moreover Bharat's Hindus, spread across this vast

sub-continent are torn and divided by religious, social and provincial strife and discord. No wonder she is today inert, oppressed and defeated and hemmed in by problems, dangers and failures. In the struggle for existence gradually Bharata is being cornered. Yet round the year innumerable festivities are loudly observed with pompous grandeur. There is a saying that in twelve months there are thirteen festivals ! Why then do not these gods help us to overcome defeat ? Why does not success crown our efforts ? This is because the Hindu has forgotton the spirit behind the externals of puja. Today the real meaning of Ganesha puja has to be realised. It has to be realised that in this age there is no hope except by taking shelter under the umbrella of the collective force. All communities of Bharata, high or low, will have to be united and form a chain that links. This will give birth to a united Bharata. Democracy and integration are not just empty words. From the divine character of Ganesha we must nourish our thoughts and activate it for the greater good of the nation.

Gaṇeś'

a's image indicates collective strength

Not only in the legends surrounding him but the determining pointer behind the image of Ganesha is the principle of laying down rules for collective strength. Let us analyse this.

Ganesha has the face of an elephant and a small mouse has to take him around as his vehicle. Fate had determined Ganesha's elephant head but it was the gift of love that brought to him this tiny mouse. At the time of birth the gods had come to see the new born Ganesha loaded with gifts of garments, adornments and priceless jewels. But Mother Earth, Prithvi came with a mouse. According to Rajnirghantu the mouse or mushik is also known as Bhuphal, meaning the fruit of the earth. It lives below the earth and is born on the earth. This justifies the name of Bhuphal. Prithvi is the mother of all the odours and fragrance we

inhale. Fragrance stands for joy. She gave the tiny mouse to be a playmate of the little boy Ganesha. To Ganesha this was the best gift of all and he appointed the little mouse to be his carriage or vahara. In this narration however, where is the reference to collective strength ?

Previously it has already been said that national integration is the coming together of both the high and low levels of society—the rich, the aristocrat, the scholar and the strong are to join hands with the poor, oppressed, ignorant and the weak. The potential of neither the big nor the small can be ignored. Ganesha attached to himself the face of the strongest beast, the elephant, but took as his mascot the small insignificant mouse. Is this not a perfect example of integration ? Despite the difference in size there are however many similarities between the two creatures. In shape and nature they are alike—note the ears, large stomach and the four legs which are short compared to their torsos. Although the mouse does not have the trunk which to the elephant is like another limb, its forelegs does the work of arms. The large elephant and the small mouse are both strong in their own spheres. Nature is to be marvelled at—the giant on one side and the pigmy on the other. And yet as creatures they are ever so alike. To be more precise it can be said that the elephant is like a mouse with a long trunk, and the mouse is like a small elephant without the trunk. This similarity did not escape the notice of our ancient seers. They placed the one beside the other to show that no elephant in society is to be ignored whether they are big or small. All are not equal in education, intelligence, wealth and valour but all nevertheless belong to mankind. Differences of nature, taste and culture will persist, but this is to be the very foundation on which the edifice of integration will stand and become stronger.

The question is—is it not rather unrealistic to make the mouse Ganesha's vahana ? How will the tiny mouse bear the burden of the huge beast ? Here again the mystery of Ganesha is unveiled. The leaders of society are few. They are greatly outnumbered by the small mice. It is these countless who form the

masses—the ganas who are enslaved and oppressed by hunger, poverty and myriad problems, struggling to survive. They are innumerable. But are they weak ? Certainly not ! The strength of the slumbering lion is not be taken lightly. Give the masses a chance to awaken and unite. Do the leaders know on whose strength they are riding ? It is the masses who are holding them up, for it is on their backs that they are established. If they rise up in anger the leaders will slide off their seats of power. Then the leaders are nowhere. It is the masses who make, carry or unseat then. Thus we understand the significance of why Gananayak Ganesha took the small mouse to be his beloved mascot.

Gaṇes'a the 'Choura'

The word Choura generally means a thief. Is then Ganesha a thief ? The legend goes that once Ganesha's mother had scolded him for it. Ah yes—we too think that the pious Ganesha is an expert thief ! If not then why does he keep the company of thieves ? His vahana the mouse is the king of thieves. 'Moosh' means to burgle and steal.

"*Yo mūṣati paradravyam* |"
"*Stayūnām pataye namaḥ* |"

The mouse is the notorious enemy of the harvest and its livelihood and daily exploit is to steal from the fields as well as steal food and other items from households. Stealthily the mouse bores through walls and floors of mud huts and what is not required he only squanders. Ganesha and his mooshik are thick as thieves like cousin brothers. Not only so—Ganesha's father is the chief of bandits. In the chapter of Yajurveda on Rudra, he is adulated thus—"Salutations to Rudra Lord of the thieves." It is popularly believed that worship of Kali was an ancient custom prevalent among dacoits. Perhaps there was a time when bandits prayed to Rudra and Ganesha for success in their ventures.

But no—the concept of Ganesha as a thief can be analysed from a different angle. It is true that Ganesha had once been a thief but he was not after wealth. He had stolen a mantra. Mother Durga made up the portions of the Ganesh-Mantra which he had stolen or rather concealed. The entire mantra is known as Thief Ganesha's Mantra. Here reference has been made to this incident of thievery.

The main cause for success is to keep the mantra a secret. There is no need to beat the drum beforehand about what has already been resolved upon to be executed ; otherwise many obstacles will hinder progress. Even the great statesman Chanakya had given similar advice.

Manasā cintitaṁ karma vacasā na prakāśayet |
Anyalakṣitakāryasya yataḥ siddhirna jāyate ||

In running the government ministers have to swear to secrecy. In spiritual life the devotee carefully guards the secret of the mantra acquired from the guru. What is more—the spiritual seeker hides in silent forests and deep caves of mountains far away from the rabble crowd. What they have earned by hard renunciation and penance is not to be given away easily and cheaply to the undeserving. There is the danger that the power would then gradually lose it's potency. Keeping in view these characteristics of concealment of the mantra, of the self, and of the divine powers it may be said that these seers are akin to the mooshik, the mouse !

Other than government or spiritual matters this principle of concealment is applicable to other spheres as well. The teacher does not leak out the questions before the exams and even after the tests the results are kept secret for some time. Are they not like thieves ? On the battle field Generals and their cohorts observe strict secrecy. What more need to be said ? The supreme creator, Sri Bhagwan covers His face with Maya and conceals His true Self from us, engaging mortals in a game of eternal hide and seek. Thus, not only should we forgive this trial of Ganesha

of being a thief but we should emulate his example. If he was not a pure thief he would not have been known as the lord of success—Siddhidata.

The Significance of Ganesha the 'Choura'

Another meaning of 'chor' is chorpushpi or the stealer of fragrance. The prominent fragrances are eight in number—chandan, chor, rochana, agaru, kasturi, mada, kumkum and hriber. In any ritual of worship fragrance is one of the five ingredients that is required. In Ganesha's puja fragrance is given top priority. Fragrance or gandha is also one of the ganas and it is specially marked out for Ganesha.

Svarūpaṁ candanaṁ coraṁ rocanāgurumeva ca |
Madaṁ mṛgadvayodbhūtaṁ kastūrī candrasaṁyutam ||
Gandhāṣṭkaṁ vinirdiṣṭaṁ gaṇeśasya maheśituḥ ||

—(Śāradatilakam)

Candanāgurukarpūrarocanākuṅkumaṁ madam |
Raktacandanahrīveraṁ gāṇapatyamudāhṛtam ||

In enumerating the eight gandhas the differences depend on the situation. But it does not matter. The real thing is that gandha is Ganesha's favourite. His whole divine body is intoxicatingly fragrant and this makes him Chaurganesha. Gandhamooshik or the mouse is his favourite. Ganesha is the symbol and incarnation of fragrance ; he steals the fragrance from the earth. In Ganesha we find bliss concentrated. Like fragrance he steals the hearts of men. To distribute joy to this world he has appropriated all the smells that there are and so Ganesha stands for all that we inhale. The essence of earth is gandha and that of Ganesha too is gandha. Ganesha is the essence and the cream. He steals all the obstacles that obstruct our path of realisation and runs away with our affections. This thief is the object of timeless worship.

Ganesha's Vahana and Success in Spiritual Struggle

Life's struggle towards realisation is very difficult. Danger and fear lurks at every corner, but let this not cause the seeker to despair and admit defeat. Remember Bighnesh Ganesha is there. In this respect a lesson is to be learnt from the character of his favourite, the mouse.

The mouse is a tiny creature and his teeth are ever more small. But easily does he gnaw his way through hard mountain rocks and make himself a comfortable shelter. But this is not done in a day. It has required hard work, great patience and untiring industry which was practised for a long time before success came. Zoologists say that the mouse has one pair of sharp chisel shaped incisors on each jaw that keep on growing, for constant use wears them out quickly. This is matched by its unfailing enthusiasm, patience and perseverence. That is why even the hard rock surrenders defeat to it. Should we not emulate the mouse in this respect ? Whether in the field of the temporal or in the spiritual level, at all times we require these qualities to make us reach our goals. Our Sangha's guru Swami Pranabananda has said that patience, forbearance and toleration are great forces of strength ; and effort, enthusiasm and perseverance are our dear friends.

The Role of Gaṇes'a's Mouse and Our Eight fold Bondages

We know that Ganesha's puja helps us to get moksha or liberation for he symbolises that knowledge which tears asunder the eight veils of ignorance that chain us. These are repulsion, sense of insult, shame, pride, illusion, arrogance, anger and imperfection. Pasha means the bonds that enslave and chain us. It may also be taken to be the noose of Maya that chokes to strangle. This gordian knot has to be cut asunder and this noose is to be loosend. Then only will Liberation be realised. Ganesha and his sharp toothed mouse show us the path.

A lion and a mouse were once caught in a strong net. Although the lion was strong he did not know the skill of how to

get free from this web. He had no alternative but to wait for death at the hands of the hunter. But with dexterity the tiny rat, gnawed through the mesh and quickly freed himself easily. In this world we too are caught in the net of mundane cares—the eight bonds that enslave us. Ganesha seems to tell us—"Be like the mouse. Let discrimination and renunciation be your two sharp teeth that will liberate you. Take the help of patience and industry. Gradually you will then taste the nectar of immortality. But remember I am the Lord of the masses. Strive for the common upliftment for I am not content with the welfare of the individual alone. He who seeks only his own welfare is selfish, self-centred and narrow. My blessings are not for such a person. He who gives attention to the collective is truly my devotee." The founder of Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Acharya Srimat Pranabanandaji has welcomed this goal of good for all as "Mahamukti". Keeping this as the base he has sketched the plan for formation of the national character based on eternal truths. The Hindu-Milan-Mandir is one such movement. The sleeping lion of the masses is gradually being awakened. The worship of Ganesha is not limited to an image made of clay—it will become truly alive only when in urban and rural centres men and women become united in a spirit of goodness and harmony. The entire nation must be baptised with the strength of unity. The guru is Ganesha!

"*Gāṇapastu maheśāni gaṇadīkṣāpravartakaḥ*" !

CHAPTER XVII

KĀRTIKEYA

Hymn

Kārtikeyaṁ mahābhāgaṁ mayūropari saṁsthitam |
Taptakāñcanavarṇābhaṁ śaktihastaṁ varapradam ||
Dvibhujaṁ śatruhantāraṁ nānālaṅkārabhūṣitam |
Prasannavadanaṁ devaṁ ṣaḍānanasutapradam ||
Om Kāṁ kārtikeyāya namaḥ |

Meditate upon the golden hued Lord Kartikeya endowed with the eight gunas, seated upon the peacock and adorned with myriad jewels. With two arms and six faces he blesses and holds aloft weapons of strength. Destroyer of enemies, it is he who gives us worthy children.

The Greatness of Kārtikeya's Birth

Kartikeya is Ganesha's younger brother. Like that of Ganesha a famous legend is associated with the birth of Kartikeya. Both narrations deal with the supernatural and spiritual—something beyond our usual physical conception of birth. But it must be admitted that for the sake of educating mankind, the story of Kartikeya is more illustrative than that surrounding the birth of Ganesha. The great poet Kalidasa has immortalised this episode in his epic 'Kumarshambhava.

The Demon Tārakāsura's Pillage of Heaven

The Puranas abound with stories of conflict between the gods and titans. Repeatedly time and again they wrestle in victory and defeat but ultimately the gods triumph. Whenever the gods found themselves cornered they turned for help to some specific divine power. Either Shiva, Durga or Vishnu came to their rescue.

On one such ocassion the demon Tarakasura had become very much powerful in heaven. The gods found themselves defeated and exiled. Indra the one time slayer of the asura Vritta, found himself incapable of protecting the independence of his immortal kingdom.

In Search of a Leader on the Battlefield

Through the ages the gods, with the help of divine powers, have been able to combat the evil asuras. But wherein lies their own valour and credit ? And what is its relevance to the solution of national problems ? From amongst the devas themselves will not such an unchallenged leader arise who will show the path from darkness to light, re-establish Lakshmi the goddess of good fortune and prosperity on her throne, put an end to the nomadic life of the gods who roamed around like refugees, and whose valour and skill in military warfare would crush the arrogance of Tarakasura ? The emergence of such a military commander was the call of the day. This time the gods did not want either Kirshna, Vishnu, Durga or Kali. That would have given them release but not a solution. The question was—where to seek for that national leader ? Where to seek for that military genius, who would be a son of this soil ? Unlike multiplying weeds and parasites the birth of such a hero is a rare event. It requires penance and the austerities of tapasya. But who will undertake such a momentous task ? Once more it is necessary to discuss this issue.

The Tapasaya of Hara-Gouri

There are only two who know the real import of tapasaya. One is the king of Yogins, Hara, and the other is the Yogini—the beloved of Hara. After the passing away of Sati, Bholanath Shiva remained immersed in his sorrow, indifferent to the world. Sati, who had given up her life unable to bear harsh words against her husband, this time appeared on earth as Parvati, the daughter of the king of Himalaya. At that time Parvati had not as

yet started her tapasaya. Meanwhile, the gods resolved that a union of the two must be effected to make it possible for the destroyer of the asuras, Kumara, to be born. They resolved upon a plan of action.

Madan or Manashija reigns in the realm of the mind and is of the mind. He symbolises the lust that engulfs our passions. Although his five arrows are made up of different gentle flowers named Aurobindo, Ashoka, Chuta, Navamallika and Raktapal, the flames from it delude, excite, squeeze, scorch and astound the victim. Indra's Vajra, Vishnu's Chakra, Shiva's Pasupat and Yama's Danda are weapons that kill instantly, but the arrows of Kamadeva like the embers of smouldering ashes burn slowly with lingering agony. This world is constantly attacked by these arrows. It even causes the stern ascetics to lose themselves. Thus the gods appointed this very Madan to break the meditation of the Lord of yogins, Mahadeva, so as to attract him towards Parvati.

At that time Parvati was approaching the meditating Shiva, with her handmaidens, to garland him as her spouse. Shiva was her beloved through many many lives, and whether a yogi or not the princess must have him as her own beloved. But lost to the world, Maheshwar was immersed in deep meditation and at first was not aware of Parvati's presence. Suddenly unexpected he became startled. His meditation was interrupted. A flash of lightning seemed to strike somewhere deep inside him and his whole being began to throb and tremble. The sleeping desires jumped into a flame.

Why ? Why are there disturbance and delusion ? Opening his eyes he beheld a maid in the prime of her youth. But, Maheswara reasoned, this was not an adequate reason enough for Yogeswara's concentration to falter. The next moment he spied Madan with his bow, hidden behind the foliage. Instantly Shiva realised that the culprit was Madan and not this innocent maiden. What impertinence ! How dare Madan come to disturb the equlibrium and rhythm of Shiva's meditation. In a flash the

calm and blissful Shiva became the enraged Rudra and flames of wrath shot forth from his third eye and struck the helpless Madan. "Forbear ! Forbear oh Lord !"—the gods cried out to stop the angry Rudra. But by that time Madan, together with his bow and arrows, was burnt to ashes.

By the force of tapasya Shiva had conquered lust and desire. Parvati witnessed this herself. She realised that to win the Yogin as her husband she too would have to take recourse to and concentrate on yoga. Shiva could not be won by the path of enjoyments. He could be reached only through stern austerities. Thus the Devi resolved to undertake tapasya. With the consent of her parents, she started on this difficult course. Scorched by five fires (Panchagni-four on four sides and the sun on the head). She observed austerities and fasted refusing to partake even of the leaf of plants. Totally controlling her breath she withdrew unto herself like the tortoise. The princess became the queen of the yoginis. Her deep seated mundane desires were totally uprooted Like Shiva, she too conquered carnality.

This is what Yogeshwar Mahadeva wanted. Now he was eager to grant Parvati what she had deserved. He appeared before her in a disguise and wanted to test her. "You are a princess. Handsome princes are waiting to garland you as their chosen one. Refusing them, why are you observing austerties for that mendicant beggar Shiva ? Shiva eats the poisonous dhutra fruit, smears himself with ashes, roams the cremation grounds of the dead, consorts with creatures of the nether world and his snakes hiss around him. He is naked and mad ! Do not hope for him. "Unable to hear criticism of her husband, Sati, had once given up her life. In this life too, once again was she to suffer such insults ? No matter who he was, such a person was her deadly enemy—he must forthwith depart from her presence. Devi became furious. Shankara sensed her fiery devotion. Devi wanted none but the Lord of the cremation grounds. Suddenly, Parvati saw before her not a stranger but the very object of her tapasya—her beloved Shiva. Her Ishta, Lord of her innermost

soul had taken a finite shape before her to surrender to her tapasya. Two pairs of eyes locked in embrace. Blushing, Devi lowered her face.

The Wedding of Hara-Gauri

King Himalaya came to know that Parvati had completed her tapasya and that Shiva had appeared before her. The hearts of both had united in love. But nevertheless a wedding would have to be arranged so as to abide by the rules and rituals of society. An example would have to be set to check indulgence. Otherwise, a chain of reaction would start that would negate the birth of a worthy progeny and engulf society in hedonistic orgy. Thus Himalaya, on an auspicious date, formally gave the hand of his daughter in marriage to Shiva. With great pomp and splendour the ceremonies were held.

The love of Hara-Gouri is an ideal one, as is their marriage. Its base is not animal lust but control of the senses. It signifies the union of souls and not of bodies. The union of Shiva-Parvati remains forever as an ideal for mankind to follow.

The Birth of Kumar

To give birth to a child is a seriously difficult task. Those who are offsprings of lust are society's liabilities. They are of no credit in any field either of knowledge, valour, excellence, health or character. Those who guard the country and society with its various activities, those who are brave and are of strong character and knowledge, are born of parents who have observed austerities and self-control. Hara-Gouri's life found fulfillment after this tapasya. Now what was wanted was a son who would banish Tarakasura from heaven and re-establish the kingdom of the gods. The Almighty responded to their fervent appeal.

Previously we have seen how Shiva and Shakti are one and eternally united. One cannot be without the other. After marriage they danced in the unison of bliss. In such a moment of joy

it even so happened that Shiva's flow of vital fluid spilled onto the Earth. Patient Mother Earth unable to bear its impact trembled and shivered. She threw it towards the glowing Fire. Fire in turn hurled it into the depths of the sacred Ganga. And from the combined tapasaya of Shiva-Parvati, the forbearance of Mother Earth, valour of Fire and the purity of the Ganga, came forth a charming divine child. Floating here and there the child came to rest in a swamp of arrow-grass. It is but natural that he who would attack the demons should choose a bed of arrows to make his appearance. There is a saying that the bird who flies, flaps its wings in the nest itself. Hail to the new born prince amongst gods ! All hail to Skanda !

Kumar was thus born. But who would tend and care of him ? It was so destined that the Krittikaganas were at that time passing that way. They beheld a divine glowing baby afloat amongst the arrow-bushes. Awakened to the urgency of motherhood their breasts overflowed with milk. Picking up the child they started to suckle it. Evolving six heads Kumar sucked from the breasts of six Krittikas and became extremely strong. How much nourishment could a single mother have provided him ? Thus the future commander of the gods required half a dozen nurse maids. Later, under Kumar's leadership, the terrible unbeatable Tarakasura was vanquished.

With six mouths he had sucked from six mothers and came to be Sharanan, the six faced one ; reared by the Krittikas he was Kartikeya ; ejaculated from Shiva he was named Skanda ; conceived of in the caves of Himalaya, Guha was another name for him ; he was Kumar son of Kutila, Skanda son of Gouri, Guha son of Mahadeva and Mahasen son of Hutasana, the fire god.

Marriage of Kartikeya

A popular belief is that Kartikeya is the unmarried eternal bachelor. But no such reference is there in the Puranas. It has only been admitted that upto the time he slew Tarakasura, Kartikeya was not married. But after that he married Devsena and

the name of their son was Bishakha. According to Devi Purana, Devsena is a part of Prakriti and ranks first amongst the Matrikas. She is worshipped by Hindus as Sashti. In Brahmavaivarta Purana, Kartikeya's son is referred to as Bishakha.

Kartikeya, the Valourous Military Commander of the Gods

The Hindus have forgotton the dominant militant characteristics of Kartikeya. Today the cowardly indulgent Bengalees have reduced him to a foppish play-boy. No longer revered by youth, Kartikeya is worshiped only in the homes of fallen women. No other god has faced such a fate on earth. No wonder the race has become low and weak comprising of a bunch of cowardly impotent eunuchs. A thousand insults and depravations cannot whip up their manhood. How long will this farce continue ?

Kartikeya, the general of the gods, slayed Tarakasura. Shakti is his weapon. To stir up valour and determination Kartikeya must be worshipped and meditated upon. The real significance of this lies in organising and strengthening our military power. Not as a play boy, but Kartikeya must be re-established as the military general.

Kartikeya as the Deified Incarnation of National Independence

Lack of political independence is a curse for any nation. The urge for independence in material and spirtual worlds have always arisen from time to time. History has never recorded that any country or nation has enjoyed uninterrupted freedom for a considerable length of time. It has been observed that whenever a nation becomes weak it is attacked and made subservient to a foreign stronger power. Against the backdrop of a timeless age, this flow of ebb and tide has been a never ending pattern of events.

Whenever the strength of a nation is cornered, the call comes for it to break it's chains. Those who give the lead and even

sacrifice their lives, are worthy of our greatest reverence. The country and society remain forever indebted to them. Bharatvarsha has responded time and again being inspired by religion. The Kurukshetra battle for the rights of the Pandavas and the combat between Devi Durga and the titans Mahisasura, Sumbha, Nisumbha are few examples of many such incidents. The war between Kumar and Tarakasura is another epoch making illustration. This prince amongst gods stood for the ideals of good over evil. All the latent urges and seekings of the gods for freedom manifested itself in the form of Kumar. Kartikeya's birth and activities are stamped with this characteristic. But do we really see him as the symbol of national independence ?

Kartikeya the symbol of youth

Kartikeya is the ideal of young boys and men. His worship should have two objectives—(1) manifesting the full vigour of youth by observing celibacy, purity and by nurturing a passionate love for one's motherland ; (2) applying this strength in the field of nation building. We have already seen that Kartikeya had jumped into the dark pit and stormed the evil forces of the demons to save and retrieve the lost fortunes, prosperity and culture of the gods. At that time, it should be well remembered, he was unmarried—a celibate bachelor.

It is the youth who are our future leaders. It is these young men who direct and reconstruct the country and its society. No wonder a nation is plunged into darkness when these fierce horses of youth run astray chasing shallow base pleasures of the senses and stumble into the quicksands of lazy luxury. Reluctantly it has to be admitted that a large section of today's youth is misdirecting the path of Bharat's progress. In their behaviour where is that moral tone, that force of valour or that compassion for mankind ? Immersed in their own selfish petty follies, blind are they to the plight of their hungry brothers and abused sisters who are trampled underfoot by brute and crude foreign influences. Quite a good amount of youthful energy is thus lost

in the desert. Saraswati, Durga and Kali Puja are observed with great frenzy but cannot the worship of Kartikeya, as the ideal of youth, be also revived ?

Kārtikeya a Symbol of Good Progeny

Usually barren women worship Kartikeya seeking the boon of a child. But should it be confined only to these unfortuate infertile women ?

Any mother desiring a good offspring should worship Kartikeya. A child should be of the stuff that can be moulded to make a wise, dutiful adult who would be full of love for the motherland. But how can such a one be begotten ? This lesson is to be learnt in the legend of Hara-Parvati and their conception of Kartikeya. Husband and wife should be self-controlled. Licentous couples cannot give birth to children who will be a credit to the nation. There may be doubt as to whether the puja of Kartikeya will guarantee fertility. But it is true that the cream of the society are born in homes where the parents are dutiful, self-restrained, and disciplined, upholding eternal moral values. In this sense it may be said that Kartikeya grants the wishes of those who seek children to be proud of. If by worshipping Kartikeya such offsprings are not produced then the worship of Kartikeya is wasted as an empty ritual.

Kārtikeya's Carrier the Peacock

Apparently it seems ridiculous that the commander of the gods should have for its vahana, the riding animal the peacock with its flambouyant tail. It is suitable for a foppish playboy but not for a military general. To take a breath of fresh air or to flirt around one can ride a peacock, but how can it be connected with the harsh realities of the battlefield ? Would it not have been better if an elephant, lion or tiger had been assigned to Kartikeya ? The answer is—no ! The peacock is the appropriate mount of Kartikeya.

Beauty and valour—these two qualities characterise Kartikeya. He is the one with the golden hue ; he is the brave warrior. So too these must be manifest in his vahana and no better choice is there than the peacock.

The meaning however still remains ambigous. Perhaps if we apply the saying "The brave alone deserve the fair", then no further objection will be raised. But where is the valour of a soldier in the peacock ?

At this point a recourse must be taken to what zoologists have to say. There is an affinity between the peacock and the common cock. Both are in Resores Order. Our sages too had noticed the similarity for, in Sri Sri Chandi, Kartikeya's female counterpart, Kaumari is adulated as the divine one accompanied by the peacock and the cock. Commentators of the Chandi opine that "kukkut" is the cock and it too is the mount of Kartikeya.

"Kukkuto'pi kārtikeyasya vāhanam"
—Candī (Gopāl Bhatta)

Mayūrakukkutavṛte mahāśaktidhare 'naghe |
Kaumārīrūpasaṁsthāne nārāyaṇi namo'stute ||
Dadau krīḍanakaṁ tvaṣṭā kukkutaṁ kāmarūpaṇam ||
—Matsya Purāṇa

In Mahabharata and Matsya Purana reference has been made to this. In the former, legend goes that the fire god Agni, and in the Matsya Purana Viswakarma, had presented Katikeya with the cock. In Bengal we generally do not come across the peacock but since both birds are similar in nature one can be replaced by the other.

In a sloka Chankya, the great scholar, enumerates four qualities of the cock.

Yuddhañca prātarutthānaṁ bhojanaṁ sahabandhubhiḥ |
Stṛyaṁ āpadgatāṁ rakṣeccatuḥśikṣeta kukkuṭat ||

It is aggressive, is an early riser, is gregarious and protective towards helpless females. In the peacock too these may be ob-

served. With skill and dexterity it battles and kills venomous snakes, awakens early at dawn vibrating the forests with its strident call, lives in a group and shows a protective attitude towards the peahen. These four are the marks of the kshatriya warrior class.

The primary objective of the kshatriya is the destruction of the enemy. The manner in which by claws and beaks the peacock attacks the snake is worth observing. Using its spread out wings as a defensive shield the peacock uses its talons and beaks to attack.

Secondly, those who are energetic and active never fail to respond to the call of dawn. The peacock is the opposite of all that is slothful, indolent and lazy. The kshatriya warrior who is to seek out the enemy has to be likewise alert. If he indulges in sleep and slumber or prevaricates and procrastinates, victory will elude him. A special characteristic of a warrior is conquest of sleep. The brave Arjuna has been named Gurakesha or the one who is ever alert, never allowing to be overwhelmed by sleep. It is this quality that helped him to overcome laziness. Thus victory to Arjuna was within easy reach.

Thirdly is the quality of sharing life with companions.

"*Bhojanaṁ saha bandhubhiḥ* |"

This requires generosity. The peacock is a typical example of co-existence. The warrior has two tasks before him. Firstly within his territory disciplined unity has to be maintained and rumblings of dissidence and revolt are to be crushed. For this the subjects must be kept contented with sufficient supply of necessities, and educated in moral, ethical and social values. Secondly, friendly relations must be maintained with neighbouring powers to prevent them from joining the ranks of enemies.

Lastly—the weak women must be protected. This is the prime duty of a gallant. A chivalrous kshatirya will not hesitate to lay down his life to safeguard the honour, prestige and purity of womenfolk. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata establishes

this very issue. The bloody battle destroying Ravana's golden Lanka was to avenge the humiliation of Sita. On the war torn fields of Kurukshetra the Kuru clan was wiped out because of the insult meted out to Draupadi. Thus we see that when the demons devoured heaven, Kartikeya appeared mounted on the peacock, which is the symbol of chivalry.

CHAPTER XVIII

ṢAṢṬHĪ

Hymn

Dvibhujāṁ yuvatīṁ ṣaṣṭhīṁ varābhayayutāṁ smaret |
Gouravarṇāṁ mahādevīṁ nānālaṅkārabhūṣitām ||
Divyavastraparīdhānāṁ vāmakroḍe saputtrikām |
Prasannavadanāṁ nityaṁ jagaddhātrīṁ sutapradām ||
Sarvalakṣaṇasampannāṁ pīnonnatapayodharām |
Om ṣaṣṭhaiy namaḥ ||

Salutations to the two armed fair goddess, with her breasts full and round in the spring of youth. With a son on her left lap, Jagatdhatri Sasthi is the eternal mother of the universe and of blessed children ; bearing all the marks of good fortune, her sublime blissful expression assures and blesses us. Salutions to Sasthī !

The Secret of the Image

With a child on her knee Sasthi is the symbol of motherhood. Our affectonate womenfolk on this earth are but reflections of this divine Sasthi.

In her hymn Sasthi is referred to as the fair one. What is the connection of complexion with maternity ? The answer is that white is the mark of purity and in maternal affections there are no stains of selfish sins. Here the quality of sattva dominates. In our talk on Saraswati we have already referrd to this. Thus the goddess of motherhood is also of fair complexion.

Devi Sashti is eternal. This too is an attribute of the mother. Under no circumstances, whether in happiness or sorrow, wealth or poverty, health or disease and life or death does the affection of the mother wane. The love, compassion and toleration of a mother towards her child is ever present, steady and firm. During dark nights of gloom it is the assurance and blessings of

the mother that steers us out of the depths of gloom and despair giving us rejuvenated strength. Thus Sasthi is the symbol of assurance.

Is she a peer amongst divinities ? Undoubtedly so. God and goddesses are there in heaven but mother is greater than even heaven. The lesser gods feel insulted at the slightest provocation and vent their displeasure on the hapless devotees in no uncertain terms. But a mother never hesitates to forgive. Having overlooked a thousand faults she picks up the prodigal child on her lap. Thinking of her children's well being she totally disregards her own needs and comforts. In the world around us is there any parallel to the love of a mother ? The mother herself is a god and Sasthi is her divine incarnation. Sasthi is not only a goddess but she is the greatest among them all.

In Sasthi reigns eternal youth. The ideal mother is always conceived of to be in the pinnacle of her youth, because it is during the spring time of life that health, beauty and the warmth of feelings are manifested at their best. The child of such a mother is the best among all. The woman who suffers from ill health and is well past, her prime cannot beget good and healthy children. The low, mean and grimy, hounded by poverty can never be the ideal mother, for children born of them will inherit their dark qualities of lowliness and meaness. They will be parasites gnawing into the vitality of society. In such, the positive forces of humanity find no scope for manifestation. That is why in the hymn, Sasthi is referred to as the one who is adorned with many jewels.

The first requisite of the ideal mother is right behaviour and purity. Keeping this in view Sasthi has been addressed as the one wearing divine raiments. The mother must never be indecently attired or indulge in frivolous fancies. She must be the epitome of purity—the ideal wife, and wear such clothes that conduce feelings of respect and regard.

On the left lap of Sasthi is seated a child. This is the form of Jagatdhatri, the universal Mother. The lap of the mother is the

best shelter for the child. In the human society mankind would have been wiped out had not the protective mothers not given shelter to the children—the future generation. One can face life without a father ; but a child without a mother finds life impossible. This is true in the case of the community as well as the individual. The world would become barren if all on a sudden, all her womenfolk were to become extinct. Sasthi is the symbol of the universal Mother, suporting the eternal flow of mankind from birth to birth. She is Jagatdhatri.

The expression of Sasthi, the incarnation of motherhood, is ever blissful. Bliss is the essence of maternal feelings. Even a faint smile from her lips makes one forget the cares and frustrations of life. Here the mother is eternally blissful. Her peace is the fountain of all that is blessed. The home where the mother is contented is indeed fortunate for its stock of wealth, fame, fortunes, peace, discipline, love, cooperation, religion and bonds of relationship never diminishes but multiples.

She, of whom the children of fortune are born, bears all the signs of good luck. There are many marks that distinguish the ideal mother. Her qualities and greatness are infinite. In a word—all the indications of goodness are manifest in her. The sage poet Ramprasad sang that just by giving birth one cannot become a mother. There are many who deliver babies but how many mothers are really there ? The ideal mother will be, devoted to her husband, selfless, disciplined, observing rituals, generous, forgiving, forbearing, catholic, ready to sacrifice self interests, dextrous and above bias or partiality—a receptacle of all divine qualities.

In the hymn, Sashti is referred to as the one whose full breasts are overflowing. Here in her bosom is concentrated her child's nourishment and contentment. With her own life-blood the mother suckles her offspring. Such as her greatness that from this flow of nectar the child gets its full sustenance. It is the feelings of affection that trigger off this flow of milk—for it is here in her twin breasts that motherhood is concentrated. Her bosom

is the heart of motherhood. The woman who is afraid of losing her figure and denies her baby milk is no mother at all but is a witch and cannibal starving her own flesh and blood. Western influence has greatly influenced some of our womenfolk to blindly think along these lines. Let them remain barren for what need have they of Sasthi's blessings ? It is better to be born of a donkey rather than be the children of such hedonistic, amoral, lustful, ignorant, foolish harlots. Let no such a fate befall the worst amongst mankind.

Ṣaṣṭhī of the Purāṇas

On the previous two occasions mention has been made regarding conflicting references made in the Puranas as to whether Sasthi is the wife of Ganesha named Pushti, or is Devasena the spouse of Kartikeya. But instead of using as a proper noun if the word sasthi is used to mean a collective ideal then the matter may be resolved. A mother must nourish as well as discipline her child to face the battle against evil. Consequently as Pushti or nourishment she is the wife of Ganesha and as Devsena she is the wife of Kartikeya—different branches of the same divine clan.

According to Devi Bhagwat, Devsena is Sasthi. She is born of the sixth part of great Mother Nature. In this sense she is an evolute and reflection of the Universal Mother. Greatest among the six Matrikas, sustaining and nourishing the young, Sasthi, the great tapasvni engaged in austerities, is a devotee of Lord Vishnu.

Sashti is another name for Devi Durga. In the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata we come across the ogress Jara. She enjoined the two parts of her new born son and gave life to Jarasandha. She is also known as Sasthi and is a household deity. The house which installs her, seated with her son, becomes a home where there is no want of food, clothing and worthy children. In Mahabharata's 11th chapter under Sabhaparva, reference is made to another Sasthi. With the Matrikas She is eternally

present at Brahman's court along with Pradha, Kadru, Rudrani, Sree, Lakshmi, Bhadra etc.

Devsena (already mentioned as another name for Sasthi) is Prajapati's daughter in the Mahabharat's Vanaparva. Prajapati had another daughter named Daityasena. Daityasena was enamoured of the demon Keshi who abducted her. But Devsena disliked the asura and when he came to take her forcefully she cried out in alarm. Indra came to her rescue and later she was married to Kartikeya. Here we see that the one parent has two children with opposite natures. The word sena points to the combined strength of the armed forces. The senses sometimes battle for the gods and at other times fight with the titans.

"Devānāṁ daityagrastānāṁ purā senā vabhuva sā |
Jayaṁ dadau sā tebhyaśca devasenā ca tena sā ||"

Hindu Bharata prays for the warrior in the woman to come out and take her rightful place. Following the footsteps of Sasthi, let her give birth to the brave—this is the desire of our hearts. Motherhood remains incomplete adorned only with the qualities of gentleness and toleration. If required, when the situation arises, women must take up the sword. The ideal mother must think that each person of the country is her child whom she must nourish, protect and develop. Herein lies a woman's greatness.

Ṣaṣṭhī—Resolutions and Rituals

It is mandatory to worship Sasthi on the sixth and twenty first day after birth of the new born. That apart during the summer month of Jaistha, mothers must observe Sasthi Vrata—Aranyasasthi. Innumerable are the other occasions for worhsipping her—Ashoka Sasthi, Jal Sasthi, Loton Sasthi, Durga Sasthi, Mula Sasthi, Patai Sasthi etc. Actually to Hindu housewives worship of Sasthi is very dear to their hearts. The many folklores around Sasthi are prevailed.

When was Sasthi puja first introduced ? How, and through whom ? We get the answer in Devibhagwat. In the Swayambhu

period King Priyavrata prayed to Sasthi to revive his dead son. Amongst the fourteen Manus, Sayambhu was the first. Thus Devi Bhagvat actually tells us that from the very beginning Sasthi puja has been prevalent.

How was it initiated ? In Devibhagavat a legend goes that in the first part of his life king Priyavrata had not married but was continously engaged in prayers and austerities. Later, on Brahma's advice he got married. But unfortunately the couple remained childless for very many years. To beget a child he started the infallible Putresti Yajna (a vedic sacrifice resulting in the birth of a son) and upon partaking of the rice prasad from the sacrificial fire, the Queen conceived. But alas ! She gave birth to a perfectly beautiful male child but it was still-born. After many barren years and stern penances a son was born but it was not alive ! The overwhelming sorrow beggars description ! The Queen fainted in her inner chambers and her handmaids were numb with grief. The whole kingdom plunged into sorrow. Loud were the wails of despair. The king took his dead child to the burning ghat, the s'msan. Holding the baby close unto himself the king mourned his loss. What is more, the king was even prepared to lay down his own life.

Just at this moment the wheel of fortune changed. The king saw blazing across the sky a divine crystal chariot studded with priceless jewels. Seated therein was a glowing goddess beautifully attired. Fair as the champak flower, calm and composed, eternal was her youth. A slight smile played around her lips. Great was her mercy towards her devotees. The King immediately bestirred himself to give the goddess her due homage. Placing his tiny burden on the ground, he first worshipped her and then asked who she was—"Devi, who are you ? Whose wife ? Whose daughter ?"

The goddess replied—"I am Devsena, Brahma's child, conceived out of his thoughts. Father has wedded me to Skanda. Amongst the Matrikas I am first. The sixth part of Mother Nature, I am known in the world as Sasthi. To the barren I bring

fertility, to the loveless I bring hope ; and wealth I give to the poor. I grant all blessed boons."

Mama pūjāñca sarvatra kārayitvā svayaṁ kuru |
Tadā dāsyāmi putraṁ te kulapadmaṁ manoharam ||

Having introduced herself she easily resurrected the babe. The King's joy thereupon knew no bounds. But instead of giving the child to the King, the Devi lifted it onto the chariot and endeavoured to fly away. Stunned, the King immediately immersed himself in ceaseless prayer. Satisfied, the goddess said—"I can return your child but on one condition. You yourself will worship me and will also spread my puja and worhsip. Your son will be famous by the name of Subrato. A part of Narayan, he will have good qualities, be scholarly and remember his past lives. A King among yogis, he will perform a hundred horse sacrifices and be an emperor amongst kings. Not only that—he will be, as strong as an excited bull elephant, extremely wealthy, beloved of the ascetics and renowned throughout the three worlds for his charity."

The King accepted Devi's words. Returning the son to his father, the goddess went back to heaven. The King came back home and with great pomp and splendour observed Sasthi's puja. Every month on the sixth day of the waxing moon this is observed. So too is it done on the sixth and twenty first day of the birth a new born.

On the Shalagram (the holy fossil representation of Narayana) or the base of a banyan tree a lump of clay is fashioned as the object of Sasthi's worship. Those who chant her mantra containing six syllables will be blessed with children to be proud of.

"Om hṛīṁ ṣaṣṭhīdevai' svāhā"—

The Cat as Ṣaṣṭhī's Vāhana

Does the cat carry Sasthi ? So far no such reference has been found in the ancient texts and any light on the matter would be

welcome. But from the point of argument the choice seems to be correct.

Today family-planning is a crying need. But there was a time when women would pray for fertility and wanted to multiply like the green grass. The cat is a prolific breeder and hence its connection with the goddess of fertility is but natural. The cat is capable of reproducing twice a year and each litter consists of four kittens on an average. The human mother is capable of having a child nearly once a year.

In the medical science of Ayurveda infertility is known as bandhak and there are approximately half a dozen reasons which obstruct impregnation. The cat is supposed to do away with these impediments and hence the animal is a favourite of Sasthi.

It is said that contact with the cat causes obstructed blood to flow. Most probably it is a case of auto-suggestion that stimulates certain strong desires in women which forcefully open up the dams that till now had blocked the flow of blood.

Homeopathy has acknowledged the relevance of the cat's milk to certain gynaecological disorders. Dr. John Henry Clark in A Dictionary of Practical Material Medica (Vol II and Dr. Wm. Boreck in Materia Medica (With Repertory) have testified to the efficacy of this in the treatment of Dysmonorrhoea and Leucorrhea.

In Tantra, Yoga etc. repeated references have been made to the curative powers of cat's milk taken as a mixture with other ingredients in matters relating to reproduction.

Puṭadagdhamārjārasthi meṣaśṛṅgī vacā madhu |
Ghṛtena saha pātavyaṁ hanti śūlaṁ ṛtudbhavam || (i)
Haragouriṁ namaskṛtya ṛtusnānāntaraṁ pṛye |
Kaṭyāṁ mārjāromāṇi dhārayet putrakāṅkṣiṇī || (ii)
Viḍālapurīṣaṁ pakvakadalī phalamadhyagaṁ |
Gosarge bhakṣaṇāddhanti vādhakaṁ ṣaṣṭhisaṁjñakam || (iii)

The female cat (and not the tom-cat) is a symbol of motherly affection and therefore she is a favourite of Sasthi.

All creatures display maternal affections in some degree or the other. This is specially pronounced in the case of the cat which displays unique affection towards its kittens. The kittens mew like human babies. The cat responds swiftly to this cry and cares for the little ones while the latter cling onto their mother from all possible angles. Like the cat, which is to us a common sight, the vision of the human mother too is steady throughout the ups and downs of her child's life.

The human child is totally dependent on its parent and by itself , it can do very little. In its infancy the kitten is likewise helpless. The cat takes it around in its mouth dumping it on ash heaps or in other secret corners. The kitten have no will or inclination of their own. Like the human mother, the cat gradually painstakingly teaches the little ones to be independent. It shows them how to use the tail as a show of strength and how to catch prey like rats and mice. In time the mother cat slowly relinquishes her duties.

On the path to liberation the seeker must learn how to surrender to God like the kitten does to its mother and keep no desires of his own.

CHAPTER XIX

GAṄGĀ

Hymn

Caturbhujāṁ trinetrāñca sarvāvayavabhūṣitāṁ
Ratnakumbhāṁ sitambhojāṁ varadāmabhayapradāṁ.
Śvetavastraparīdhanaṁ muktāmaṇibibhūṣitāṁ.
Tato dhyāyet surūpāñca candrāyutasama prabhāṁ.
Camarairbījyamānāñca svetacchatropaśobhitāṁ.
Suprasannaṁ suvadanāṁ karuṇārdranijāntarāṁ.
Sudhāplāvitabhūprṣṭhāmārdrāgandhānulepanāṁ.
Trailokyanamitāṁ gaṅgāṁ debādibhirabhiṣtutāṁ.
Divyarūpabibhuṣāñca divyamālyānulepanām.
Om gaṅgayai namaḥ.

Ceaselessly meditate on Mother Ganga—the blissful divine goddess with four arms, three eyes, holding the bejewelled pitcher and white lotus, blessing and assuring us, attired in white, adorned with gems, uparalleled in beauty, glowing like myriad moons, caressed by the chamarifan, seated under the white canopy, wearing divine garlands, ever blissful, compassionate, showering all around the nectar of holy waters, worshipped with fragrant incense, revered in the three worlds and adulated by the gods.

Gaṅgā in the Vedas

Ganga cleanses the stains of this Kali Yuga. She is the great tirtha of this age. Although not fully established in the Vedic age, it must be admitted that, like the river Saraswati, the Ganga is a Vedic river.

In the Rigveda, Sindhukshit Rishi chants in praise of the rivers. In this the Sindhu is the greatest in might. It has six

tributaries to make up the Seven-Sindhu river. In the Vedas, reference has often been made to it. Many scholars are of the opinion that the Aryans have been referred to as 'Hindus' because they had settled by the banks of this river.

"Oh Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Sutudri and Parushni, divide amongst yourselves this hymn of praises. Listen ! Listen oh divine ones to this hymn. "Reference is also made to the rivers Trishtama, Susartu, Rasa, Sweti, Kurmu, Gomati, Kubha and Mehetnu. Schoalrs say these are other names of the rivers Satadru, Iravati or Ravi, Chenab, Jhilum, Bipasa or Beas and Kabul. Chenab and Jhilum together make Marutvridha. Whatever it is—the name of Ganga comes first amongst all these rivers.

Imaṁ me gaṅge yamune saraswati śutudri
Stomaṁ sacatā paruṣṇyā.
Asiknyā marutbṛdhe vitastayārjīkīye
Sṛṇuhyā suṣomayā.

In the Puranas Ganga is stated to be the daughter of Janhu. In the Rigveda (3/58/6) we come across the name Janhavi, or from the ancestry of Janhu, Janhavi or Ganga. Thus the Ganga of the Vedas and of the Puranas are one and the same.

In the Vedic age the Aryans were originally settlers in Brahmavarta by the banks of the Saraswati. Gradually they spilled over to the areas washed by the Sindhu and its tributaries. It thus appears that although the river Ganga was not unknown to them, actual occupation of the Gangetic plain had not yet started. Perhaps an element of fear was a deterrent. In a Rik, mention is made of the Pani tribe who were looters of cows and lived in this region.

Gaṅgā in the Puranas

'Go' means Mother Earth. In another sense Ganga means she who has come to this earth. From where has she come ? The

answer is to be found not in the Vedas but in the Puranas. Ganga has come from Brahmaloka. How, why and for what purpose has she forked off into various branches and what are their names and greatness—all the answers are to be found in Ramayana, Purana, Mahabharata, Devibhagavat etc. In the beginning it should be mentioned that opinions are contradictory.

Source of Gangā

The Ramayana says that the King Himalaya of the mountains and his wife Mena were the parents of Uma and Ganga. In Brahmavaivarta Purana, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Ganga are the three wives of the one Vishnu. Saraswati cursed Ganga—"Become a river !" Ganga likewise cursed her to be a river. Lakshmi mediated, but her good intentions turned sour. She too incurred the same curse. The squabble of the gods became a blessing for man. We cannot always understand the import of divine games for we only skim the externals and do not dive in to the depth. This wrangle was just a pretext for their descent to earth. Ganga and Saraswati retained their names but Lakshmi came to be known as the Padma. Their touch made this land golden in fertility and purity.

Brahmaivarta Purana narrates another story. Ganga had once desired Krishna. This enraged Sriradha. She resolved to drink up the river. Frightened Ganga sought shelter at the feet of Krishna. The three worlds became dry and Brahma's creation seemed to shrivel to death for want of water. The helpless gods prayed to Krishna. Appeased, Krishna released Ganga, making it flow from his toe. Since then another name for Ganga is Vishnupadi. To make Bhagirath's penance successful, Krishna made Ganga appear on this earth.

It will not be necessary to tell the reader that this story is of rather recent origin.

The most popular legend about Ganga reads as follows. The great devotee Narada was proud that none could parallel him in

the field of music. His pride crushed underfoot the ragas and raginis, twisting and warping them. In other words, music had nearly reached its nadir and yet Narada was unaware of this catastrophy.

It so happened that Narada enquired and came to know that because of his errors the ragas and raginis had met such a fate. Now, what should be done to save the situation ? They told Narada that only if Shiva took up music could there be a remedy. Shiva is the father of the music. To break Narada's pride, Shiva agreed to come forward. The stage was set in the heavens as the ragas and raginis prepared to pour forth their soul. But who will appreciate such a divine music ? Even Brahma was not qualified enough—leave alone Narada. Vishnu could partly qualify and as his being began to melt, responding to the divine tunes, Brahma carefully stored these flowing vibrations in his kamandula or pitcher. This was the Ganga. For a long time Ganga remained imprisoned in Brahma's vessel.

Ganga is referred to as either Vishnu or Shiva's wife. Temporarily she was also the wife of King Santanu. Apparently it is difficult for us mortals to aesthetically accept these contradictory legends. Actually Ganga in parts belongs to Vishnu, Shiva, as well as to Santanu. As Santanu's wife she bore him Bhisma, the senior head of the Kuru clan. Ganga is thus also known as Bhismajanani or Mother of Bhisma.

Gangā's Descent to Earth

In the first chapters of the Ramayana, it is described how Ganga descended to earth.

Sagar was King of Ayodhya and he had two wives—Keshini and Sumati. Keshini gave birth to only one son named Asamanjha, but Sumati became the mother of 60,000 sons. Sagar dispossesed Asamana for oppressing the subjects, but his grandson Amsuman was the king's favourite.

Once King Sagar initiated the Horse—Sacrifice and sent forth the horse. But Indra stole the animal and hid it in the nether

world in the hermitage of the sage Kapila. The King's yajna meanwhile remained incomplete for the horse had not returned. He then instructed his sixty thousand sons to find the animal. Having failed to trace it anywhere, the prince began to dig into the earth. But here too they met with failure and returned to the king to seek further instructions. The king told them to dig the under-world. They began to delve deep into the bowels and came upon the hermitage where the horse was hidden. The sons accused Kapila of stealing the animal and the enraged muni burnt sixty thousand of Sagar's sons to ashes.

Anxious at the delay, Sagar, sent his grandson Amsuman to find out his uncles. He could not locate them but their sad fate overpowered him with sorrow. He began to seek means for their redemption.

Garuda, the son of Vinata, was the brother of Sagar's wife Sumati. Garuda gave the advice that to resurrect his nephews, Ganga must be brought down from heaven and its waters sprinkled on the ashes. No other water would do for the last rites.

Upon Amsuman's return with the horse, the Horse-Sacrifice was completed. But Sagar's mind was taken up with only one idea—how to make Ganga descend from the heavens. According to the Ramayana, Sagar remained immersed in this thought for thirty years.

After Sagar, his grandson Amsuman became king, followed by Dilip. They too remained occupied with the same thought. Later on Dilip's son Bhagiratha was annointed king and became immortal for bringing down to earth the holy Ganga.

Pleased with Bhagirath's penace, Brahma granted him two boons—Ganga would descend from heaven and the touch of her holy waters would release the sixty thousand sons of Sagar from their curse. With Brahma's blessing Ganga would come down but who could withstand the force of her descending might ? Brahma advised Bhagiratha to seek the help of Shiva, the One with the matted locks. None but him could hold the cascading Ganga.

Bholanath Shiva became pleased with the tapasaya of his devotee Bhagiratha. He spread out his massive locks on the mountains and summoned Devi Ganga—"Come and descend !" Dancing and prancing Ganga responded to the call of Shiva and she came down in thunderous torrents. Such was the force that even Shiva's matts strained to hold on. But Shiva, using his tremendous power, kept Ganga imprisoned in matted his hair for many many years. Later, at Bhagirath's request, he parted his hair and released small portion of the waters to form a lake.

Ganga follows a three fold course. That which flows to heaven is Mandakini, that descending to the nether world is Bhogavati and the flow on earth is named Bhagirathi after king Bhagiratha. From the lake it forks out into seven branches—Lhadini, Pabani and Nalini in the east ; Sita, Sindhu and Kuchakshu in the west ; the last one followed Bhagiratha to the confluence at the sea—Sagarsangam. En route there was a problem at the herimitage of Janhumuni. The water of the river washed away the yajna preparations of the sage and the enraged hermit drank dry the river. But afterwards the prayers of the gods and Bhagiratha cooled his anger and Janhumuni released the Ganga through his ears. (There is an opinion that the waters began to flow from his thigh.) From thence Ganga came to be known as Janhavi. She was like a daughter to Bhagirath and thus was also named Bhagirathi. Ganga, meeting the sea at the confluence of Sagarsangam, liberated the sixty thousand sons of Sagara.

Geography says that the source of Ganga is at Gomukha peak on the Himalayan mountain range. Eight miles away is Gangotri. The confluence of Ganga and Alaknanda is known as Devprayag ; that with Yamuna and the secret Saraswati is Trivenisangam. Before meeting the sea, the Gomati, Gharghara, Sone, Varuni, Asi, Gandaki, Kushi, Rupnarayan and many other rivers and streams flow into the Ganga. The main river flows through the centre of Bengal enriching her fertile valley. That is why Ganga here is known as the goddess of good fortune—Lakshmi.

In North India the main pilgrim spots are situated on the banks of the Ganga. That apart there are the ancient holy sites of Hardwar, Prayag, Varanasi, Navadveep, Kalighat etc. The confluence of the Ganga with the sea is known as Gangasagara. Each year in the peak of winter, on the last day of the month of Pous, there is a huge fair where gather innumerable devotees, ascetics and householders from all corners of India. Bharat Sevasram Sangha dedicates its services at this annual gathering where a permanent ashrama and pilgrim shelter have been constructed. Pilgrims can stay there at any time of the year.

The Mahabharata says that one dip at Gangasagara is equivalent to the blessings of ten Horse-Sacrifices (Vanaparba 70/4). Hearing of its greatness from Narada, King Yudhisthira sage Lomas, priest Dhoumya, all well wishing Brahmanas and the other Pandavas, except Arjuna, with Draupadi went on this pilgrimage. Following the advice of Sage Pulasta, Ganga's son Bhisma too, went to Sagarsangam.

Does a Dip at Gaṅgāsāgar Lead to Liberation ?

The summer solstice commences from Makarsamkranti, the last day of the month of Pous. The Gita says the path of Uttarayan is the way of eternal light leading to Liberaton. On this auspicious day if one bathes at the confluence, prays, gives alms and visits temples, all sins are forgiven and one is released. It has already been said that Hindus believe the Ganga to be very sacred. Is it just a blind faith ? No it is not so. At its foundation is a deep spiritual truth and yogic secret which few care to understand. But if we look into the inner meanings behind the legends surrounding the source, descent and confluence of the Ganga these truths become apparent.

We know that it was for the liberation of man that Ganga descended to earth. Each soul trapped in mortality seeks liberation. But a few dips in the sacred waters cannot really uproot unending cycle of desires and liberate man. To attain liberation one has to dive deep into the well of eternity inside one's own being.

The sage Ramprasad said—"Take the name of Kali and dive into the depths of the heart to seek the priceless jewel." Where is one to reach ? Ramprasad again sang—"Two or four dips will not get you that wealth. Use your utmost powers, hold your breath and dive straight to the point where your potential divinity (Kulakundalini) is lying coiled in slumber. This is the Yogic Bath. If, with the external rituals of bathing, we do not tune in our inner being, then the Ganga will remain just another river on the geographic map and nothing more. It may cleanse our bodies but the core of our soul will remain untouched. How will spiritual release be possible ? The greatness of Ganga revolves around this central theme of liberation of ourselves. If we take a dip in the Ganga, consicous of its inner significance, then alone do we move onto the path to Liberation. Now let us see how the legend is a pointer to this.

The word 'sagar', used as 'gar', is co-existing with poison. It is said that Bahur's wife Gurbini gave birth to Sagar along with poison. So Sagar is a symbol of man coated with the grime of mundane desires. Ordinary beings are born with these urges hounding them throughout life. These desires are innumerable and cannot be counted. These whip us on to seek ceaselessly wealth and fame.

Sagar had two wives—Keshini and Sumati. Keshini with her thick lustrous hair and unparalleled beauty was a moving symbol of desire. Sumati was wise—she epitomised restraint and discipline. In each of us both these tendencies are present. Under the pressure of greed and ambitions man runs after power and wealth. This made Sagar release a yojna horse to trample victorious across the corners of the world. Sagar's inner desires were symbolised by his sixty thousand sons. In search of the horse, these sons toured the earth destroying whatever came before them and even dug up the bowel of the land to make a nether world. But peace could not be found in externals. The impulses and tendencies must be restrained by the harnesses of self control and discipline. With the help of a saint the piled up

desires of a thousand lives must be burnt to ashes. This is what ultimately happened to Sagar.

Sagar's horse was stolen at the hermitage of the saint Kapila. Kapila was an incarnation of Narayan and his mission was to free man from the shackles of ignorance by lighting the flames of knowledge. The first thing a guru does is to negate the disciples accumulated stock of desires and turn the force towards restraint and renunciation. Thus if Kapila had abducted the horse it was only for Sagar's well being. *The word 'aswa' means that which does not remain in days to come—it is perishable. Thus Kapila, as the teacher and guru, burnt to ashes the thousand fold desires of Sagar. But frustrated desires lead the mind onto anger and so the progeny of Sagar determined to punish Kapila.

Amsuman means rays of light. When passions and impulses are subdued then good sense and conscience comes to light. This self-enlightenment bore forth the good tidings from the hermitage of Kapila. He said—"Let the horses of lust and greed burn in the fires of knowledge. Know that desires are not your friends but your enemies. Salvation lies in the saving grace of the Ganga flowing from the feet of Sri Vishnu. Pray for her to descend—observe tapasya for her blessings. You will be released from the twin pincers of happiness and unhappiness". The sorrow of the death of his sixty thousand sons awakened in Sagar a spirit of renunciation or indifference to the mundane. Renouncing all motivated sacrifices and rituals he turned towards attainment of the Self. In this he was engaged for thousands of years. His descendants Amsuman and Dilip also followed his course of austerities. But it was king Bhagirath who attained the supreme truth.

Bhagirath is the one with the perfect body manifesting the qualities of knowledge, valour and renunciation. Such a body was ideal for practising yoga and Bhagirath was in yoga. Ida,

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Actually the theft was committed by a gang of robbers who kept the horse hidden at the Ashrama of Kapila and ultimately this went in favour of Sagara as spiritual 'Sadhava' is concerned.

pingala and sushumna are the three ways running up from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. Bhagirath awakened these three streams of the Ganga and made the way clear for the serpentine latent power to hiss forth, uncoiling and manifesting itself. The Ramayan narrates these immortal legends of Bhagirath. Bhagirath had performed tapasya disciplining his mind and body by observing celibacy. He exposed himself to fierce summer, chilling cold and remained submerged in water, suffering the lashes of the monsoons under open skies. In all seasons he ate only the leaves that fell from trees. Often did he remain still, balancing his weight on one toe, keeping arms suspended and living only on air. Touched by his severe penance, the saviour came down in flowing waves of compassion. He who can be reached only through yoga, allowed Himself to be caught only by the yogi, by the path of classical yoga which penetrates the impregnable circle.

It has already been hinted that the flowing Ganga is the symbol of great Mother Nature as the coiled serpentine power responding to Shiva's call. She is the sound of 'Pranab'. In Brahma's Kamandulu she rests in the coiled potential form. There, in the Kamandulu, she had neither flow nor current, or thunderous waves. In other words, Ganga was in a state of sleep. Pleased with Bhagiratha's tapasya, Brahma released and opened the doors as it were. Immediately Ganga hissed forth in cascading gurgling torrents increasing her speed and velocity as she descended. In yogic parlance it may be said that inside Brahma's vessel she rested in the circle known as Muladhar—the primal point where is present Brahma Himself. When Brahma opens the portals, the serpentine force rises in all the grandeur, penetrating the circles of Manipur and Brahma's knot.

Ganga, the essence of Vishnu, was pleased with Bhagirath and was not concerned unduly with the problem of hurdles created by Vishnu. The last one was that of Shiva which had to be overcome to attain Liberation. That is why Bhagirath had to turn to Shiva. Rudra Shiva parted the intricate network of the

matted locks of his hair and released Ganga. Intoxicated with her freedom, Ganga pranced along in gurgles and curves ; her one aim was union with the sea.

The confluence of Ganga and Sāgar is Gangasagarsangam. It is the meeting point of the terrestial with the spiritual. In the human body it is the Ajnāchakra or the divided circle. Here Kapila, the guru of knowledge, is eternally seated. At this border line point of division he seems to point to the devotee—"Look : Look : There is the mighty ocean. It is here that you must lose yourself. You are not an insignificant river, but you are the great sea itself. Desire had blocked your vision. I burn to ashes these bonds of lust and greed and release you towards the path of Liberation. Your tapasaya has been completed. Take from me now the gift of knowledge. From henceforth you are free. "The guidance of the guru is required at the beginning and his blessings are again needed at the end of the journey towards Realisation. And to give the final blessings at the point of Ajnāchakra the compassionate guru is forever waiting, in a subtle form, for his disciple to come.

This Ajnāchakra is also known as Vindusarobar or the lake in a point. It is the field of knowledge. From here the Ganga forks out into seven directions which stand for the seven branches of knowledge. 'Sita' ploughs the material world and makes it ready for implantation by the guru. 'Nalini' is where realisation of the Self in self blooms forth ; a thousand petals ascending in tiers of circles. In 'Sindhu' Ganga searches for immortality in a spontaneous flow, finding divinity in every nook and cranny of this earth as 'Kuchakshu'. The 'Hladini' flow tastes of the bliss of Liberation, which is realised in the stream of 'Pabani'. Finally is the 'Bhagirath-dhārā' wherein the great Ganga embraces and becomes one with the Ocean. Here the devotee loses his identification with the body. At this point the body becomes divine—the Bhagirath. The Self has been realised.

Those who are aware of this inner significance and then takes the holy dip at Gangasagar, accelerate their journey towards salvation.

The Vast irrigation work on This Earth

From the Ramayana we have come to know of the legend of Ganga. Apart from its spiritual significance there is a practical approach which cannot be overlooked. The wide majestic flow of the river is a symbol of Bharat's spiritual endeavours. The rain from the skies remained locked in the mountain peaks waiting for the call to come from the plains asking it to descend. The dynasty of Sagar, with a special purpose, special reason, special discipline and skill, in a planned manner sought a way to bring down the river. Ultimately Ganga followed her own course, but initially the path had to be carved and dug out. The sixty thousand sons of Sagar took part in this excavation, digging deep and wide. But some accident claimed their lives. Nevertheless the work was continued by Sagar, Amsuman and Dilip. The last one to take it up was Bhagirath. He performed tapasaya in the Himalayas. This means that the sons of Sagar had started from the confluence at Sagarsangam and dug a distance of 60,000 yojanas and completed the work that had to be done in the plains. The portion to be completed in the upper mountain ranges was now left to be done where Ganga was trapped and encircled by the Himalayas. In the beginning, Bhagirath had confined his tapasaya at Gokarna situated high in the snow bound ranges. From there he cleared the path through which Ganga thundered down in torrents and the rage of her cascades increased wide and deep. There is a saying that it is the flow that determines the might of the river.

The bringing down of Ganga by Bhagirath is the greatest yeoman's service ever undertaken. This mammoth project involved tremendous labour, deep intellect, much wealth, many lives and uncountable number of years. Thus we see that the truth of history is no longer unintelligible in these legends.

Why is Ganga the Most Beloved of Aryan Hindus

Why is it that the river, whose banks were once dangerously inhospitable become the darling of the Hindus ? How is it that she came to be adulated as a divine deity ? From when ?

We have already said that in the Vedic age the majority of the Aryans inhabitated the banks of the Saraswati. In the Aryan country there is no other area greater in fertile richness than the Gangetic basin. Pressure of increasing population made movement towards the north and east inevitable and more and more acquaintance was made with the river. Like the Saraswati, the banks of the Ganga came to hum with the activity of yajna, Vedic chantings, songs, rites and rituals. Innumerable pilgrim spots and hermitages sprang up and Ganga became the heartland of the Aryans who were characterised by their devotion to spiritual seekings. To them Ganga was the greatest source of inspiration. The fertile river delivered them from fear and want of food ; life became smooth, allowing them to devote time to spiritual exercises, freed from the basic struggle for existence. Ganga quenched their thirst in more ways than one. The pure waters cooled their inner being and the invigorating fresh air around the banks made them healthy, blessed with longevity. The beauty of the flowing river made them spellbound. On either banks villages, towns, commercial complexes and cities mushroomed. Improvements in navigation made trade prosper. Thus for many reasons Ganga became very dear to the Vedic Aryans and they could not find words to express their respect, gratitude and adoration. The rich Ganga was indeed divinity incarnate.

Gaṅgā both as a river and a goddess

In the hymn to Ganga she is remembered as a goddess, but nevertheless her identity as a river is not lost. We shall clarify this point.

Devi Ganga has four arms. One of the right arms assures us freedom from fear. Her river banks are most suitable for spiritual exercises and she herself as the Mother is there to protect. The other right arm grants us boons. The Gangetic basin blesses its inhabitants with water, fresh air and abundant harvests. Ganga is water deified. The lotus blooms on water. That is

why mother Ganga holds the flower in one of her left hands. Ganga epitomises wealth and so in her other left hand she holds aloft a rich pitcher. She is seated on the sacred lotus which is the symbol of the Gangetic basin's spiritual significance.

In the hymn she is referred to as the one decorated with jewels. Do we find any indication of this in the river Ganga ? Yes, ofcourse ! The source of the Ganga is in the Himalayas and it ends its journey at it's confluence with the sea in the Bay of Bengal. Gajamukta, Shuktimukta are found in Himalayan heights and ocean depths respectively. That apart the waters abound with other gems and it is little wonder that Ganga is conceived as the one adorned with jewels. A million moonshine droplets frolic on the crests of her waves making her aglow in spiritual wealth. The upper mountain-reaches, near Ganga's source abound with Chamari cows. This name too is found in her hymn and the fresh air inhaled by the banks of the Ganga is like the caress of the fan made from the tail of that animal.

Ganga originates from Gomukh. This is her crown. It is eternally covered with snow. The pressure of ice increases as we ascend and the entire range presents a panaromic view clad in spotless white. Its like a white umbrella held over the Devi. This is also mentioned in her hymn.

Devi Gnaga is productive and of graceful bearing. That she is in eternal bliss can be seen in the unending dance of her waves. The frothy crescents of the ripples are like water swans or the "jalhamsa" referred to in the hymn.

Ganga is adulated as the one surrounded by fragrance and as the queen of the three worlds wearing the divine garland. This is because innumerable devotees all along the banks daily make offerings of sandalwood paste, agaru incense and garlands. Many flowers too bloom along her banks.

The Greatness of Gaṅgā

In the Mahabharat's Vanaparba, the seventh chapter waxes eloquent in praise of Ganga.

Yadyakāryaśataṁ kṛtvā kṛtaṁ gaṅgābhiṣecanam
Sarvaṁ tattasya gaṅgāmbho dahatyagniribendhanam.

King Pulasta tells Bhisma, the patriarch of the Kuru clan—"If the sinner once takes a dip in the sacred Ganga all sins are washed away like wood is burnt to ashes by fire. In the Satyayuga the entire area was holy ; in Treta yuga Pushkar was the most important pilgrim spot ; in Dwapar it was Kurukshetra but in Kaliyuga, Ganga is the greatest tirtha. Chanting of her name removes all sins. ; a sight of the river brings blessings, and drinking its water means salvation for ancestors and descendants. My home is there, where flows the Ganga—it is the hermitage where my tapasayas bear fulfillment."

Sarvaṁ kṛtayuge puṇyaṁ tretāyaṁ puṣkaraṁ smṛtam
Dvāpare tu kurukṣetraṁ gaṅgā kaliyuge smṛtā.
Punāti kīrtitā Pāpaṁ dṛṣṭā bhadraṁ Prayacchati
Abagāḍhā ca pītā ca punātyāsaptamaṁ kulam.
Yatra gaṅgā mahārāja ! sa deśastattapovanam
Siddhakṣetrañca tajjñeyaṁ gaṅgātīrasamāsritam.

In the Hindu Puranas there are thousand slokas adulating Ganga. So too are there countless hymns, eulogies and prayers. In one such verse it is said that by taking a bath in the Ganga on the day of dusserah ten types of sins are cleansed. One dip in the river releases mortals from the crime of killing countlss brahmins. If death comes consciously or unconsciously man reaches either instant liberation or Brahmalok respectively. That is why it is mandatory to proceed towards the sacred river when life is nearing its end.

Acharya Shankar, the incarnation of Shiva, had dedicated a hymn to Ganga. It is an unparalleled literary creation in metre, poetic content, play of words, richness of mood and depth of devotion and faith. That is why this hymn is very dear to all throughout the length and breadth of India. In it, Shankar says that Ganga is the living deity, the Goddess of all the divinities of gods, Bhagavati, the saviour of the three worlds, Bimala, the

giver of happiness and the redeemer of the downtrodden. He who drinks her sacred waters reaches the feet of Brahma. The devotee of Ganga never has to fear Yama, the god of death, because Ganga removes, the fires of hell, sin, disease, sorrow, pain and blesses all with her compassion. Shankar stresses that our ultimate goal is Ganga the blessed one who gives shelter to the seeker. It is better to be a fish or reptile in her waters, an undertaker of the dead in the cremation ground bordering her banks, rather than be born as a high caste or a king in a country where flows not the sacred river.

Why Does Gangā Bear the Reptile-Fish Makar (Shark)

In the Gita Sri Krishna says that amongst the creatures of the deep I am the shark and amongst the rivers I am Ganga. Why is makar the carrier or vahana, of Ganga ? The answer lies in the above statement of Sri Krishna.

As Shiva's wife, Ganga epitomises primal energy in the form of a female deity. Although for salvation, she, in her compassion flows as a river, her greatness is not diminished by an iota. It is manifest in her immense mass, fathomless depths, limitless boundaries, swirling eddies, lightning currents, fierce waves and thunderous falls. The makar in the waters is the equivalent to the lion amongst beasts. In the depths, none can parallel it in strength and valour for, like the lion, it has powerful jaws and a lashing tail. Not only man, but it drags into the river large animals like buffaloes and cows that graze along the banks. These qualities have made it Ganga's mascot.

Makar is the symbol of the seeker. It occasionally surfaces from the depths in search of light, air and freedom. What is Liberation and where is that to be sought ? Where is the path ? Take the help of liberating Ganga, follow her, surrender to the certain flow of her current towards the sea and depend on her. The day will surely come when you will become one with the ocean. This feature of the sadhak is characteristic of the makar.

'Mak' means going forth. Amongst the creatures of the waters, the makar is the swiftest and it flows with Ganga's current. In a literal sense it is dependent on the Ganga and is under her shelter. To the makar there is no other alternative but the Ganga and to her, it has surrendered for all times. Itself seems to be moving towards the sea flowing with the current and herein lies supreme Liberation.

The first syllable is 'ma' and in tantra this stands for the great primal energy—the serpentine force dividing creation into forms.

Ma kāraṁ śṛṇu cārvaṅgi svayaṁ paramakuṇḍalī
Taruṇādityasaṅkāśaṁ caturvargapradāyakam.
Pañcadevamayaṁ varnaṁ pañcaprāṇamyaṁ sadā

It is itself the five elements and the five life-giving forces. This 'ma' is the makar of Ganga. Like the lion of Durga, this makar, the shark of the waters is as strong as the rising sun in valour and life force. The reader might be curious to know the connection with the awakening of the coiled serpentine; Kulakundalini.

The makar represents desire. Eternally entwined with the five life giving forces of man, is desire. Cleansing and channelising this energy is the awakening of divinity in man. Man becomes Shiva the God. It should be noted that the basic energy is one and the same. When it flows through mundane earthly fields it is animal in nature, but when it scales the heights of mood and thought it becomes divine. Let us see how this awakening and arising typifies the makar.

Water constitutes a good portion of man's make-up. The flowing Ganga occupies that centre in the human body known as swadhistan chakra. This area is the kingdom of the makar and is also the field where man's lusts find fulfillment. Kamadeva, the god of love, reigns here and the image of the makar adorns his flag. At this centre it is fast in movement, arising and ensnaring mankind by the bonds of ignorance and consequent suffering. Unless this makar is subdued the inner potential of man will not

be able to manifest itself because the first criteria for success in yoga is celibacy.

Whom the god of love has held aloft, this same makar, is trampled underfoot by the liberating devi Ganga. Lying at her feet the wild makar is tame and docile. It is by the grace of the devi that this energy has been harnessed to be the vahana of the goddess. It itself has become celibate. It is Ganga's shelter that has given the creature divinity. From the example of the makar the seeker learns, how, with the help of the mother, lust can be conquered.

On the auspicious occasion of Makarsamkranti, it is very holy to take a dip at the sacred confluence of Gangasagar. In the subtle world beyond our perceptions, the sun is joined to the makar rashi (zodiac sign) and thus starts the seasonal summer circle. The Gita says, this route of Uttarayan is ever illumined. This is the carriage way of the gods leading to Liberation and the seekers of Brahma reach Brahmaloka treading this path.

CHAPTER XX

GANDHEŚWARI

Hymn

Om simhasthā śaśiśekharā Marakatapreksṣā caturbhirbhujaiḥ
Saṅkham cakra-dhanuḥ śarāṁśca dadhatī netraistribhiḥ
śobhitā.
Āmuktāṅgadahāra-kaṅkaṇaraṇat-kāñcīkvaṇannūpurā
Durgā durgatiharinī bhavatū no ratnollasatkuṇdalā

The three eyed goddess is seated on the lion, with the crescent moon as her tiara ; glowing like the Markata gem, her four arms hold aloft the conch shell, wheel, bow and arrow. Adorned with armlets, necklace, wristlets, vibrating girdles, and jingling anklets, let the bejewelled Durga destroy all our enemies and misfortunes.

Sri Durgā and Gandhes'warī

Gandheshwari is Sri Sri Durga's four armed image. In the hymn itself she is addressed as Durga the destroyer of our sorrows. Like Durga, Gandheshwari sits astride the lion and her four arms display the conch shell, wheel and other weapons.

The Name—Gandhes'warī

There is a class of merchants called Gandha. According to Parasar their original vocation was to deal in fragrances. Later they crystallised into a particular trading community. In the summer month of Baisakh they worship Devi Gandheswari, their chosen deity. But the word has another important inner meaning which cannot be overlooked. Gandha, or smell, is a quality of the earth and the lexicon says that Gandhamata means earth. The ten-armed Durga who destroys the demon Mahisasura is worshipped in the homes of merchants as the four armed Gandeshwari.

Gandhes'warī manifests good fortune and wealth

Gandheshwari, like Lakshmi has four arms manifesting wealth and prosperity. She is wearing many precious gems. A necklace of pearls encircle her neck ; bejewelled armlets, wristlets, anklets, ear-rings and a waistband adorn her.

This is the image of wealth. The complexions of both Lakshmi and Gandheshwari are golden in hue like the yellow of the Markat jewel. The difference is that while Lakshmi's field is much wider, Gandheshwari's focus is on trade and commerce. Lakshmi assures us of all round prosperity but Gandheshwari secures for us our business assets specifically. Thus Gandheshwari blesses and multiplies, as well as fiercely guards, the fortunes of her devotees. Thus it is of little wonder that she is particularly dear to the Gandhabanik business community.

Gandhes'warī as the symbol of trade and commerce

In the hymn it is specially mentioned that the vaisyas, or merchant class, specially revere Gandheshwari. She is Sashi-Sekhara. The moon is like the flowing nectar, but right now we shall not discuss that. The Devi's main capital is spiritual wealth. Let us see in what respects she manifests the qualities of the merchant class.

The moon is the lord of the vaisyas and in this sense Gandheshwari is their prime divinity. The moon rules our hearts. In this sense the wise merchant finds prosperity through honest means of sale, purchase, savings, investment, supply and also indugences in charity when required. With the Devi's inspiration the trader is blesséd with good sense ; he avoids the temptations of fraud, black marketing and the sins of being faithless and greedy.

Gandhes'warī, the Saviour

The merchant faces the two fold problem of acquiring and protecting merchandise. In both situations gods, fate and the ele-

ments have their say. Death, disease or accidental infirmity may overtake the trader on his travels in search of wealth. Or, greedy ferocious plunderers and thieves may raid and snatch his goods. Then again, fire or floods might claim all. How will the merchant seek to avoid these pitfalls ? There is only one who can help. Durga is the devi who protects against all mishaps. To the merchant she is Gandheshwari and to all creatures she is Mother Earth—Prithivishwari. Cry like the infant and see for yourself that the compassionate mother cannot sit still. She allows herself to be captured, granting boons and assurances. The one who calls out to her as one's own, is given shelter by the goddess as her dear beloved. Durga is the chosen one either for the merchant seeking wealth or for the sadhak seeking knowledge. With her loving affections both wealth and knowledge can be won. The protection of her name is a charm that guarantees against all adversities.

Gandhes'warī's Vahana the Lion

Gandheshwari is another image of the mighty Durga. The lion carries Durga and therefore it is moot that it bears Gandheshwari. But here the matter should not end. Gandeshwari is a special incarnation of Durga connected with trade and commerce. Against this background how does the lion fit in ? In Sanskrit there is a saying that those who, by will force, shape their own destiny, are the lions amongst men.

Udyoginaṁ puruṣasiṁhamupaiti lakṣmīr -
Daivena deyamiti kāpuruṣā vadanti.

The coward sits back and surrenders to fate. In order to instil tireless effort, industry and enthusiasm, the goddess appears before the merchant astride a lion—the fearless king of beasts. Big or small—in all endeavours the lion prevails.

What is the main significance of the worship of Gandeshwari? The goddess seems to say—"Pray for my boons but, like the lion, arise and make the effort. The lazy and indolent do not

get me. My four arms stand for work. Will you then retire into the four walls of your home, withdrawing your arms like the tortoise and only whine and wail to me ? If that is so then all your pujas are futile. Foreigners will plunder your land and you, like a shameless beggar, will roam from pillar to post ekeing out a miserable existence." Today our plight is somewhat like this. Where are the blessings of Gandheshwari ? Few are those who put their heart and soul into her worship.

Like the merchant in search of wealth, the seeker of knowledge needs what ? In this context, our Guru, the founder of the Sangha, said — "Who are our real friends ?" Our friends are Fervour, Enthusiasm and Perseverance." This advice is applicable to all of us in each sphere of our individual activities.

CHAPTER XXI

JAGATDDHATRĪ

Hymn

Siṁhaskandhasamārūḍhāṁ nānālaṅkārabhūṣitāṁ
Caturbhūjāṁ mahādebīṁ nāgayajñopabītinīṁ
Śaṅkhasāngarsamāyuktā bāmapaṇidvayānivtāṁ
Cakrañca pañcavāṇāṁs' ca dadhatīṁdakṣiṇekare
Raktavastraparīdhānāṁ bālārkasadṛśītānuṁ
Nāradādairmuniganaiḥ sevitāṁ bhavasundarīṁ
Trivalībalayopetanābhi-nālamṛnālinīṁ
Ratnadīpe mahādīpe siṁhāsanasamanvite
Praphullakamalārudhāṁ dhyāyettāṁ bhavagehinīṁ

The devotee conjures up the image of the great goddess seated on the shoulders of the lion, four armed, with the serpent as the sacred thread encircling her neck. Her left hands display the conch shell and bow ; her right hands hold aloft five arrows and the wheel. Attired in garments as red as blood, the beautiful goddess' complexion glows like the rising sun. Narada and other sages are in constant devotion at her feet. The lotus blooms on her navel which is encircled by a three tiered waistband. The spouse of Shiva, she is enthroned on a raised bejewelled dias where the lotus is in bloom.

Who is Jagatddhatrī ?

Creation is in an eternal flux. Through ages the flow of its movement and nature changes course. In the external world there is nothing to be found which is eternal ; everything, either today or tomorrow perishes. But despite this, creation abides—it is there an ever present reality. Each day death stalks life but the planet has not become barren. The seed sprouts from the rotting dead leaves and blooms into new life with all its colours, hopes and desires. Many contradictory forces clash and combat but life

has not become extinct. Look to the sky—innumerable countless stars rush and swirl but yet none collides. The insignificant frictions can hardly disturb the general law. The fathomless oceans in thunderous waves swell towards the shores gushing to swallow and drown it. But checked it crawls back in docile surrender. Why ? What is the secret ? Behind the perishable world an all-powerful preserving force is at play ; this is an unchanging eternal truth. The waxing and waning of creation rests on this sure ground. It is this that makes creation kick around on the lap of security through ageless Time. It is Devi Jagatddhatri upholding and supporting from behind the ebb and tide of movements and forms.

It is on the lap of Jagatddhatri that the universe plays out its game of appearing, abiding and disappearing. It is she who nourishes and sustains. Man must acknowledge her, for, to deny her is to deny creation itself. If Jagatddhatri fails us then there will be instant dissolution and like a clay jar the sandcastles will crumble to nothing.

The Great Advent of Jagatddhatrī

Devi is eternal. She has neither beginning nor end. Nevertheless for the welfare of man, at times she manifests herself and this is known as her advent or appearance. We know that in Sri Sri Chandi references have been made to different incarnations of Durga. In the hymn to Katyani the legend of Jagatddhatri is narrated. In this Tantra it is said that in the age of Tretayuga, on the occasion of shukla navami or the ninth day of the full moon, Jagatddhatri appears as the sustainer and nourisher of this world. Thenceforth this day has been marked for her worship.

In Bengal, the pious king Krishnachandra of Nadia first initiated her worship. He was a shakta—a worshipper of the Mother as the primal force. The great saint and poet Ramprosad was one of the nine jewels in king Krishnachandra's court. Another one was the author of the celebrated lyric ballad Annadamangal, Bharatchandra Raigunakar. The puja of Jagatddhatri

is observed with great pomp and splendour at Krishnanagar and Chandernagar apart from other centres in Bengal.

Jagatddhatrī The Greatest

Who is the greatest in The Universe ? Fire or Wind or Water or is it the moon or any other god ? There was a time these four considered themselves to be the greatest. They forgot that it was Jagatddhatri, the primal energy and force, that had manifested herself in them. Without her saving grace they had no separate existence. The goddess wanted to humble their pride. With the glow of a billion suns Devi appeared before Fire and Wind and asked them to either burn or move a single blade of grass. They failed and realised that their strength was not equal to even a stalk of grass. Futile was their bragging. They also came to know that the blinding illumined vision before them was the source of their strength. It is her blessings that made the Rudras, Basus, Adityas, Viswadevas, Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Agni, Soma Pusha, Bhaga etc. what they are. She was above them all—their one and only object of homage and prayer. The proud devas humbly surrendered at her feet and resolved to worship her as Devi Jagatddhatri.

In the Kenopanishad, a similar lore is narrated. Here, Uma humbled the pride of Indra and others. The gods thought that it was they alone who had defeated the demons. But after testing their strength they discovered that a single blade of grass would not bend to their wishes. It was the Brahmashakti that moved them—it was this fuel that gave them force. This story has been slightly altered to fit into the legend of Jagatddhatri. In significance and context both are alike.

Devi Durga and Jagatddhatrī

Basically Durga and Jagatddhatri are similar. According to Mahabharata, another name of Durga is Jagatddhatri. In the hymn to Jagatddhatri she is repeatedly referred to as Devi. "Hail Jagatddhatri ! You are compassion itself ; your glance is full of

compassion ; compassion flows ceaselessly from your heart ; you negate our sorrows and guard us against evil. To you we pay obeisance. We pay homage to Durga, the giver of victory, the source of all bliss, the shelter of all, the Mother of creation. In Sri Sri Chandi, Devi's character has been described. In the 116th sloka of the 5th chapter Jagatddhatri merges into Durga. In the first character of Devi, she is characterised as Jagatddhatri and in the 63rd Sloka this is specifically mentioned.

Dayārūpe dayādṛṣṭe dayārdre dukhamocani
Sarvāpattārike durge jagaddhātri namo'stu te
Jayade jagadānande jagadekaprapūjite
Jaya sarvagate durge jagaddhatri namo'stu te

"Durgā bhagavatī bhadrā yayedaṁ dhāryate jagat"

Tvayaiva dhāryate Sarvaṁ tvayaitat sṛjyate jagat
Tvayaitat pālyate devi tvamatsyante ca sarvadā

Visweswarīm jagaddhātriṁ sthitisamhārakariṇīm

In the description of Devi's middle character we see the gods after the destruction of the demon, Mahisasura, gathered heavenly flowers to offer puja to her who upholds the universe.

Evaṁ stutā surairdivyaiḥ
kusumairnandanotbhavaiḥ
Arccitā jagataṁ dhātrī tathā
gandhānulepanaiḥ.

Finally in the last chapters after killing of Sumbha-Nishumbha, the gods again began to eulogise the Dęvi—"Hail Devi ! You are the goddess of the Universe, the mother, sustainer and nourisher."

Vis'ves'varī tvaṁ paripāsi vis'vaṁ
Vis'vātmikā dhārayasīti vis'wam

Running through the entire course of Sri Sri Chandi is this central idea. The names of Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati find their unity in Jagatddhatri the one and only. The rituals of Jagatddhatri puja follow those of Durga puja. It is observed on the ninth day of the full moon in the month of Kartick and this day is also known as Durganavami.

Kārtike śuklapakṣe ca yā durgānavamī tithiḥ
Sā praśastā mahādeva mahādurgāprapūjane

The great Durga is Jagatddhatri herself. Like the Durga puja the seventh, eight and ninth days of worship are followed by immersion on the tenth day, Dasami. It is said that the hours of dawn, noon and evening typify sattvic, tamasic and rajasic puja respectively. The three days of saptami, ashtami and navami too stand for the three stages of development, the three qualities of nature that lead us on from light to more light.

Prātaśca svattvikī pūja madhyānhe rājasī matā
Sāyānhe tāmasī pūjā tribidhā parikīrtitā

Devi Slays the demon Karindrasura

The main differences between the images of Durga and Jagatddhatri are that the former has ten and the latter four arms ; Durga slays Mahisasura and Jagatddhatri kills Karindrasura ; one has the complexion of the rising sun while the other is akin to the hue of the atasi flower. Both are astride the lion.

Who is Karindrasura ? When and how does the Devi slay her? Apart from folklore no other evidence, even from the Puranas, can be cited. We shall be grateful for further light on the matter and will rectify further editions accordingly.

But regarding this issue we are not absolutely in the dark. The centre piece of Sri Chandi gives us a lead. It seems to us that Karindrasura is another disguise of Mahisasura. During his fight with the Devi. the demon had taken recourse to various subterfuges. Once he confused her by appearing as another lion. But she who has witched entire creation with her Maya could

not be long deluded by a mere asura. In a flash she had decapitated that lion. Next she slew the titan who had now taken on the form of a king-elephant. The goddess cut off its trunk which was extended to attack the lion. When Mahisasura was killed the gods and celestials broke out in music ; Apsaras began to dance and all chanted the name of Devi Durga.

Tata evāśu puruṣaṁ devi ciccheda sāyakaiḥ
taṁ khadgacarmaṇā sārdhaṁ tataḥ so'bhūnmahāgajaḥ
Karena ca mahāsiṁhaṁ tañcakarṣa jagarjja ca
Karṣatastu karaṁ devī khadgena nirakṛntata

Why is the Complexion of Jagatddhatrī the Hue of the Rising Sun

Jagatddhatri has been compared to the glow of dawn. What is the secret and the connection with her as the one who upholds the Universe ?

In our discussion on Surya we have seen that it is the sun who nourishes the entire world. Our solar system revolves around and is attracted by the sun. Devi Jagatddhatri too sustains and nourishes and so she is compared to the sun. For the same reason the weapons of Vishnu, the preserver, are to be found in her hands. Like Vishnu, Jagatddhatri has four arms. Then there is another view that the blood of Karindrasura has tinted her with a reddish gold.

Jagatddhatrī as the symbol of Power

There is another hymn on Jagatddhatri apart from the first hymn which has been cited while introducing this chapter. It says—"Hail to her in whom is manifested primal Energy itself." In the first, the external image of the goddess is described but the second hymn points to the significance of her character. Her hymns need to be carefully studied and absorbed.

The Significance of the Principles Underlying the Concept of Jagatddhatri

In the hymn she is adulated as the prime Energy seated on a corpse. Thus she is mobility and immobility as well.

Śavākare śaktirūpe śaktisthe śaktibigrahe
Saktyācārapriye devi jagaddhatri nam'ostu te
Ādhārabhūte cādheye dhṛtirūpe dhurandhare
Dhrube dhrubapade dhīre jagaddhātri namo'stu te

Devi Jagatddhatri rests on that Cause of all causes, which creates, preserves and destroys this Universe. The red of her hue and robe, her weapons and her mascot the lion, are all symbols of power. By her own might she sustains all that is eternal in Time. The worshippers of Shakti pray to her everyday.

The Devi is That in which everything rests. She herself is this myriad diversity in unity. By dint of her power to hold and retain she cradles the universe. Dhur means weight and since she supports the weight of this creation she is Dhurundhura. Eternal and steady, it is by her that the creation waxes and wanes in rhythmical order. And eternal is she to those who take shelter under her.

What is it that makes Jagatddhatri mighty ? The answer is found in the first hymn. It is said that the sacred serpentine thread encircles her. The naga or snake symbolises yoga. Yogini Jagatddhatri sustains creation with her yogic power ; she creates and preserves, nourishes and sustains. With our limited intellects it is not possible to realise her true significance.

The Lion as Jagatddhatrī's Vāhana

We have seen that basically there is little difference between Jagatddhatri and Durga. Thus the lion is Jagatddhatri's vahana for the same reason. The lion can not only crack the skull of a buffalo but it can bring down an elephant, swinging it by its trunk. So it is but natural that the lion who slays the elephant should be the vahana of Jagatddhatri. Both the goddess and the

animal carrying her are symbols of strength and power. Both are monarchs protecting and ruling their subjects. Like other animals the lion does not attack without a good reason. It has been noted that the lioness first attacks its prey, or kills it and then gives it to her lord the lion, like the wife caring for her husband. The cubs partake of their share afterwards. Finally, whatever is left are eaten by the other animals. Perhaps the behaviour of the lion has shaped the rudimentary social rules of primitive man. The lion is majestic to behold with the gorgeous mane framing its regal appearance.

The terms jagat and dhatri respectively refer to the universe and to her who upholds it. Jagat means the universe and dhatri refers to her who upholds it. Sri Ramakrishna said that the wild elephantine stampedes of our inner mind too must be brought under control. It's an appropriate simile or, for our ego is like an untamed bull-elephant which must be defeated by the lion of our conscience. Once this is under control, Realisation is at our disposal. With the grace of the Supreme the devotee is eternally protected. In other words Jagatddhatri herself descends to sit enthroned in the lotus heart of the seeker. Who can dare to harm her protected ones ?

CHAPTER XXII

SHONI

Hymn

Saurāṣṭraṁ kāśyapaṁ śūdraṁ sūryāsyaṁ caturangulam
Kṛṣṇaṁ kṛṣṇāmbaraṁ gṛdhragataṁ saurim caturbhujam
Udyadvāṇadharaṁ śūladhanurhastaṁ samāhvyet
Yamādhidaivataṁ devaṁ prajapātipratyadhidaivatam

Son of the Sun, four fingers high, having a dark complexion and attired in black, sporting in his four arms the bow, arrows and spear, devotee of Yama and Prajapati, is Shoni the god of Saurashtra, belonging to Kashyap Sudra lineage. Let us pray to him to descend.

Shoni in the Puranas

Modern science says that like the other planets Saturn or Shoni is a chip off the sun. This was not unknown to the ancient authors of the Puranas of India. They said that the sun god Vivaswan and either Chhaya or Sanga were the parents of Shoni. Shoni is a part of the Sun and is thus also known as Saura. As Chhaya's child he is Chhayasuta. It is said that Shoni is from Saurashtra because the planet was first observed from this region of India.

Skanda Purana narrates that Shoni appeared at the confluence of the rivers Kshipra and Khwata. It is auspicious to bathe, meditate and indulge in charity here on the occassion of those Saturdays which coincides with the fortnight of the waning moon. The Puranas mention many names of Shoni—Sauri, Sanaishchar, Manda, Krishna, Ananta, Antak, Yama, Pinga, Chhayasuta, Babhru, Sthavar, Pipplayan etc. Chanting these names at dawn pleases Shoni and the devotee has nothing to fear from him.

Shoni is a god who easily loses composure. His existence causes fear to god and man alike. His birth made the three worlds tremble as he made his path through the skies. A mere glance from Shoni burnt out his father's two glowing legs. It is not difficult to imagine Shoni's fierce power. The frightened gods turned to Brahma for help and Brahma in turn asked Surya to control his child. But Surya pointed out the fate of his own limbs and pleaded helplessness. Brahma could not summon up courage and Vishnu too was unwilling. Ultimately God of the gods, Rudra came forth. Poison could do Shiva no harm and so why should Shiva be afraid of Shoni ?

Responding to Rudra's summons, Shoni appeared before him with down cast eyes. (Shoni's mother Chhaya had instructed her son never to lift his head because a glance from him would be enough to exterminate creation.) The God of gods Shankar advised Shoni—"My child, why do you oppress everybody ?" Shoni replies "What will I eat ? Tell me, where will I stay ?" Mahadeva answered—"Residing in particular zodiac signs you will worry mankind for specific periods. " These were marked out in details and Shoni's abode was specified. Here the Prithikeshwar Shivalingam came to be known after Shoni as Sthavareswar. Brhamvaivarta entertains another opinion regarding the scorching powers of Shoni's glance. Shoni was not born with this inclination. The legend says that even as a married man Shoni's celibate life style and devotion to Krishna caused this misfortune. Shoni was married to the daughter of Chitraratha. Attired in bridal splendour she approached her husband with burning desire in her heart, but Shoni was so absorbed in meditation that he did not notice his wife. Frustrated she burst into a rage—"Since you did not fulfil and satisfy me I curse that on whatever you glance upon shall perish ; it shall be burnt to ashes." Later Shoni repeatedly tried to appease her but the curse could not be withdrawn. When Devi Parvati had asked him why he kept his head bent, Shoni had replied—"Oh Mother, because of my wife's curse I do not look upon anybody. From thence on

I am afraid of my destructive glance and keep my head downcast."

Tena mātarna paśyāmi kiñcidvastu svacakṣuṣā
Tataḥ pravṛti namrāsyaḥ praṇihiṁsābhayādaham

However, Ramachandra's father Dassarath, a mere mortal, once challenged Shoni—that Shoni whose glance made Brahma, Vishnu and other gods tremble and who burnt to ashes Surya's limbs and decapitated Ganesha. The Skanda Purana says that the astrologers once predicted that because of a specified course that Shoni would undertake, the country would suffer twelve long years of drought. King Dassarath immediately resolved to alight from his Kamgami chariot, (Super fast one given to him by Indra) and block Shoni's path. Facing Shoni, Dassarath dared him either to change his route or face death. Shoni was taken aback and could not imagine that an ordinary human being could thus face him. Upon enquiry when Shoni found that the king was thus emboldened not for selfish gains or egoistic bombast but for the welfare of his subjects, Shoni gladly promised to change his course.

But another king of Ayodha name Srivasta had to suffer the anger of this whimsical god. Virtuous Srivasta had committed no fault, but nevertheless he had to undergo misfortunes. Srivasta lost his kingdom, wealth and was separated from his wife etc. He was caught in a quarrel between Lakshmi and Shoni both of whom boasted of supremacy over the other. The hapless Srivasta was asked to deliver judgement. How could he do so ? As Lakshmi sat on a gold and Shoni on a silver throne, Srivasta calculated that she was greater than Shoni. This enraged Shani and casued him untold suffering.

The main scribe of Yama is Chitragupta. There is an opinion that Shoni married his daughter. Shoni is seen as a warrior in the Puranas and has four arms sporting weapons of war. The legend in the Bhagavat is that Shoni fought against the demon Narak.

Shoni's Position in Eastern Astrology

In eastern astrology Shoni is referred to in the neuter gender and is associated with shudra, the working class.

"Klivānam budhamandauca"
Patirmando'ntyaje jane"

Shoni is given a place with the gods but his position is not very high. It is true that like other deities Shoni's worship includes elaborate rituals, but it is observed neither in homes nor in temples but under the open sky. This is not only as an outcome of fear but perhaps because of Shoni's low caste and neuter gender that householders are reluctant to give him entry into their homes. Shoni's worship is simple compared with the ingredients required for other gods. A little bit of til seeds and the krishna flower suffices. A lead amulet and offerings of specified seeds, lentils, a piece of cloth etc. negate Shoni's curse. In folklore there is a saying that burnt Shol fish cools Shoni's anger.

The position of the zodiac sign of Shoni at the time of birth determines, according to its place, the future of the child. The first position fortells the loss of property and suffering ; the second, mental suffering and material loss ; the third, material gains ; the fourth, multiplication of enemies and harm to sons, servants and fortunes ; the sixth, gains in wealth ; the seventh, harm ; the eighth, physical ills ; the ninth, losses ; the tenth, mental suffering and uneasiness ; eleventh, gains in wealth and the twelfth, steady decline in fortunes. Shoni's wrath causes floods, drought, whirlwinds etc. to intensify and the juice of luscious fruits like sugarcane to become dry. If ever one is hapless enough to come under Shoni's scorching gaze then exile, imprisonment and loss of shelter are his lot. He incurs the displeasure of the king, and thieves break in and steal, while fever grips him and his health fails. His life is in danger as fortunes and friends vanish. Slowly a moral decay drags down the unfortunate. But if he is pleased Shoni can promise an empire.

The ruling deity of the Saturn or Shoni is Yama, the Lord of Death. From this we can understand why he appears so fearful to mortals. The opposite of death is multiplication in life. The Saturn is connected with two astrological signs or rashis—

Makar and Kumbha. That is why in Garg Samhita the vahana of Shoni is the Makar.

Other names of Shoni are Manda and Shanishchar. These names are related to movement. The speed of Saturn is much less than that of the earth revolving the Sun. The Earth encircles the Sun in one year while Saturn takes thirty nine years to do so. Because of this, Shoni is often referred to as immobility personified.

Shoni is a glowing planet emitting a golden hue. Hence the names Babhru, Krishna, Pinga etc. are associated with him. Since Yama is his chosen deity, Shoni is also mentioned as Yama, Antak etc. He does not occupy a place in Rig Veda because of his low caste. The name of Shoni can be found in Atharvaveda where he is named Pippalayoni in association with a sage of that name in this Veda.

Why is Shoni Four Fingers High

We have already said that Shoni controls two zodiac signs Makar and Kumbha. Astrologers say that none but Shoni rules over these two signs. If the zodiac circle measures 24 fingers then each would measure two fingers. Thus Shoni is calculated to be 4 fingers—($24 \div 12 \times 2 = 4$).

It may be mentioned that the following measurements are observed :—Sun-12 fingers ; Moon-1 hand ; Mangal-4 fingers ; Budha-2 fingers ; Brishaspati-6 fingers ; Sukra-9 fingers ;

Why is Shoni a Shudra ?

The question may well arise—that if Shoni is the son of Surya who belongs to the warrior caste Kshatriya, why is it that Shoni is said to be a low caste Sudra ? This needs scrutiny.

Firstly, Shoni's mother is Chhaya who is not the real wife of Surya. She is an imitation of Surya's wife Sanga. This has tainted the birth line of Shoni.

Secondly, even though he was the son of Surya, Shoni married the daughter of Yama's scribe Chitragupta. This alliance of

the warrior with the cleric was frowned upon in the society of the gods.

Thirdly, Shoni inherited the qualities of a sudra. His complexion is dark like that of his mother and like the slothful and ignorant he is prone to be illtempered and lazy. These are characteristics of the low born.

Another reason is that Shoni is thought of to be an eunuch and perhaps this was a disqualification in the hierarchy of the gods. Finally it may be said that in the external world each planet has its own position, speed, nature, shape and accordingly its status is categorised. The astrologers had taken the help of science to accord Shoni to his appropriate position.

Why is the Vulture Shoni's Vāhana

There is a startling similarity between the vulture and the character of Shoni as described in Astrology and the Puranas. That is why this bird is Shoni's vahana.

Firstly, for some unknown reason, man considers the vulture to be a sign of ill omen. If it descends on the ceiling of a home the householder breaks into a flutter and sometimes even goes to the length of pulling down the roof of his house. The writer has himself witnessed two such incidents.

Secondly, the high flying vulture's vision is always focused downwards and its piercing gaze easily notices the food it seeks.

Thirdly, the vulture frequents garbage dumps and feasts on rotting decay.

Fourthly, the creature is a coward, lacking in manly qualities. Despite its size the vulture never makes the effort to hunt live prey and suffers meekly sticks and stones, without a murmur.

It is, therefore little wonder that the vulture is the chosen carrier of the eunuch Shoni, who, on the command of Shiva and his own mother, can never hold his head up high, who is the unholy planet and whose glance spells doom.

CHAPTER XXIII

VĀYU, PABAN AND THE MARUTS

Vāyu in the Rig Veda

Vayu, Paban and Marut are basically the same in quality but are described in various ways. Although we are discussing all three in one chapter each has its own speciality.

Vayu means that which eternally spreads joy everywhere. Its source is the breath of the Divine One. The Rig Veda makes frequent references to Vayu.

Vayu removes all that is evil from us and brings from the realm of gods longevity, health and good fortune. It is never idle but is ever active for the good of man. Vayu, the son of the sky Bhuban, is the very heart of the gods and moves around freely. We cannot see Vayu but can hear it.

Vayu is the main support of our life. Because he is there, so too creation exists. Thus Vayu is our mother, father and friend. He has nectar in his abode—the nectar which he distributes.

The Maruts in Rig Veda

In the Rig Veda the Maruts are said to be the sons of Vayu. They are also referred to as the children of Rudra and Dyulok and are most probably forty nine in number.

Rig Veda says they are brothers of the same age living under the same roof. They snort like the bull, make the mountains tremble, uproot trees and shake the earth like intoxicated elephants. At times they either roar like the lion or whine like a new born calf. Singers of the heavens, the Maruts chant hymns and fan the fires of Indra and Surya.

Vāyu and Paban in the Purāṇas

The descriptions given of the basic nature of Vayu in the Harivamsa, Vayu, Agni, Brahmanda, Saura Puranas and the

Mahabharata are akin to the Vedas. In the Puranas Vayu is the lord of all fragrance, etheral beings, sound and ether.

Vayu is the first amongst the eight Vasus. When the ocean was being churned and a war broke out between the gods and titans, Vayu fought against Puloma. Paban is omnipresent and is the master of his senses. He is worshipped in an island called Bhadrakar and is the greatest amongst the gods, of directions guarding the North and West corners. This is known as Vayukona.

Yoga says that in all creatures, the Vayus control the forces of life and breath. Their seats are in the heart, lower regions, navel, throat and the entire body. They control the circulation of blood, food intake, digestion, excretion, breathing and preservation of cells. That apart, there are in all bodies five other Vayus known as Naga, Kurma, Krikar, Devdutta and Dhananjoy—who are in charge of excretion, hunger etc. Dhananjoy Vayu is present everywhere—even in the dead. According to the medicinal science of Ayurveda the Vayu in our bodies can be divided into innumerable categories. If Vayu is angered and loses its balance the body becomes ill. It is Vayu that keeps in equilibrium the watery substance and the bile secretions of all creatures. In yoga the mental states can be reined by bringing breath into control. This process is known as Pranayama and is acknowledged by modern science for its beneficial effects. There are three types of Pranayama known as Purak, Kumbhak and Rechak. However, care should be taken in receiving instructions from a proper guru in order to avoid the harmful side-effects.

In the Puranas, Vayu's wife is Vayabi. She has come into form from the left side of Vayu. There is a legend that once Vayu was attracted to the ten daughters of King Kushanabha. But the daughters were reluctant to accept him without the consent of their father. The frustrated lover became enraged and with a mighty blow bent the backs of these maidens. Since then the capital of King Kushanabha is known as Kanyakubja. Most probably the fact is that a cyclone devasted the kingdom of King

Kushanabha and amongst others his daughters too were injured. Perhaps this incident became a legend in Pauranic lore.

Paban is but another name for Vayu. There are forty nine Vayus under him and Paban deva resides in a city called Gandhavati. He sired Hanuman,Son of Anjana, and Bhima, son of Kunti. Both Hanuman and Bhima like their father, are famous for their valour and strength.

The Maruts in the Purāṇas

Regarding the advent of the Maruts there is a well known legend in the Puranas which we have already come to know in our discussion on Indra. Here we again recapitulate it. When Aditi gave birth to Indra, Diti became very jealous. She went to their husband Kashyap and wanted for herself another son akin to Indra. Kashyap could not refuse his second wife.

Meanwhile Indra became worried when he came to know that his step mother had conceived and that the child was to be of great valour and strength. Seizing an opportunity (when Diti, careless about purity and cleanliness had gone to sleep) Indra entered her womb and cut up the foetus into seven pieces. Each piece he again sliced into seven parts. When the children began to wail Indra tried to pacify them by saying "Do not cry". This awakened Diti but by that time the deed had already been done. Indra came out of the womb and repeatedly begged forgiveness at the feet of his step-mother. Diti was at length appeased and her anger cooled when a humble contrite Indra gave his assurance that henceforth he would protect his forty nine brothers, never wish them harm and moreover he would share with them the works of the yajna. At the time of chopping up the sons of Diti, Indra had said "Ma Rodi" or "Do not cry". And so, thenceforth they came to be known as the Maruts. The children of Diti are usually counted amongst the demons but these Maruts are exceptions. They are ranked amongst the gods.

The abode of the Maruts are the seven layers of space ascending upwards from the earth to Dhruvaloka—abaha, prabaha,

udbaha, subaha, bibaha, parabaha and paribaha. Each 'gana' consists of a marut. The Vayupurana gives a detailed account of which layer each occupies.

Valour, grace and chivalry characterise the Maruts which they manifested in a great degree when engaged in a tussel for the Nibat amulet between the gods and the asuras. They are also known to have blessed king Marutta with a never ending supply of food.

Regarding the birth of the Maruts contradictory statements are given in the various Puranas. Vayu Purana narrates that the best son of Tamas Manu known as Dantadhwaja, arranged for a self-sacrificing yajna and from its fires arose seven brave sons who were crying. Brahma christened them The Maruts. Vishnu, Matsya, Shiva and Skanda Puranas and Harivamsa etc. say that the mother of the Maruts was the daughter of Daksha—a Marutti.

The difference in nomenclature and quality between Vāyu and Paban

Many qualities and characteristics are attributed to Vayu or Paban, each of which determines the various names for the one. They are Gandhabaha, Pabaman, Mahabal, Sparshan, Āshuga, Swapan, Matarishwa, Nabhaswan, Marut, Anil, Samiran, Jagatprana, Jiban, Prishadaswa, Taraswi, Prabhanjan, Pradhavan, Anabastan, Dhunan, Moton, Khag etc.

Vayu or Paban has seven qualities—freedom, lightness, coldness, roughness, fineness, consciousness and magnetism. Vayu is independent and therefore free ; it is light and cool and yet at times rages and thunders ; its feather soft caress instantly awakens awareness ; it has the quality of attracting moisture and by it humidity increases or decreases ; it absorbs fluid contents of all matter.

The Deer as Paban's Vāhana

According to the Puranas the deer is Paban's vahana, but in the Rigveda Vayu's carrier riding animal is the horse—the blue

horse attached to his golden chariot. They are at times one hundred or one thousand in number. The Vedas however agree that the deer is the vahana of the Maruts. The horse symbolises strength and speed but the deer seems to be the most appropriate manifestation of the various qualities of vayu.

The scriptures say that amongst the gods the fastest is Vayu. It is not just a mere saying but an empirical truth. Once there was a race amongst the gods and Vayu came first. The deer is not only as fast as the horse but is also streamlined and slim. Moreover it is Vayu that carries fragrance of all kinds and the horse has nothing to do with this. But the Musk Deer is famous for the scent it carries in its navel. Thirdly the Maruts are often referred to as the divine minstrels, for Vayu is the father of sound and speech. Although the deer itself is not a singer, the hunter traps the animal because it is easily hypnotised by music.

In the deer we find the combined attributes of Vayu and the Maruts. Furthermore the speed of Vayu matches the swiftness of the deer. Similarly movement of both is unrest in nature. Zoologists rightly described the deer as a restless creature. And as for our classical bards—they have epitomised the deer as Movement itself. Not only in motion but the painted eyes of the gentle deer overflows with depth and compassion. The prancing fawn can well be compared to the rustle of the gentle spring breeze.

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